

You are travelling to another dimension...



THE TWILIGHT ZONE

CHOSEN • THE PLACEBO EFFECT

A novelization by K C Winters

You are travelling to another dimension

*A dimension not only of sight
and sound, but of mind*

*A journey into a wondrous land whose
boundaries are only that of the imagination*

You are entering The Twilight Zone

New Line Television unleashes the seminal classic series into a modern incarnation featuring all new tales from The Twilight Zone. This awesome book features two stories with a sting in the tale that will draw fans into a world of fantasy and suspense like no other!

Chosen

Vince refuses to believe when two strangers turn up at his door, telling him he is "chosen". But when people in his neighborhood start disappearing, Vince begins to suspect that "they" are not all that they seem.

The Placebo Effect

Dr Leslie Coburn knows she's in for a rough day when hypochondriac Harry Raditch walks into her office. But then his fevered imagination creates an all-too-real plague that could wipe out mankind!

CHOSEN

Based on the Teleplay written by
Ira Steven Behr

ONE

Vince Hansen looks back at his short life and sees nothing but defeat. Now he's about to be offered a second chance.

But second chances aren't always what they seem—in the Twilight Zone.

It was a one-in-a-million chance that something like this would happen. In fact, the possibility had seemed so remote that, when it happened, everyone who might have known better was completely taken by surprise. Still, they were familiar enough with this type of situation to immediately take steps to correct it.

They just never factored in what the greater repercussions of the event would be.

On June 18th, at 6.15.40 am, Greenwich Mean Time, the Earth made contact with a low-level geomagnetic storm, courtesy of a shift in the sun's magnetic field. It was a fairly common occurrence: a star constantly goes through cycles of increased activity—sunspots, solar flares, coronal mass ejections—and with it comes a variety of effects, not the least of which is the temporary disruption of radio and satellite communication. Some storms are more powerful than others, and the bigger the storm, the more problematic its effects. The people of Quebec, for example, know all about that. In 1989, a class G5 storm knocked out their power grid.

But the solar flare that stretched out like a devil's finger to prod at the Earth that morning was nowhere close to being that strong. According to a report that would be made public the next day by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, it was one of the weakest geomagnetic storms recorded in the past six years. True, there had been a momentary loss of radio communication as solar static drowned out satellite signals, but the airwaves cleared soon enough, and the storm eventually passed. Any damage the satellites

might have suffered, it was stated, would be minimal—the world would still have access to its countless cable channels.

What no one realized, however, was that even "minimal" damage might be too much for delicate circuitry that had already absorbed more than its fair share of solar radiation. And when the circuitry housed in that particular satellite malfunctioned, creating a signal "virus" of sorts in the data stream it broadcast, which, in turn, was passed along to other satellites to which it was linked...

Well, who would have ever suspected the dark times that lay ahead?

The gunship swept across the Arizona desert, a sleek black silhouette against the full moon that silently watched from a star-filled sky.

Inside the helicopter's passenger area sat two men and two women. They had been hastily assembled just over an hour ago—summoned from their homes, or from social functions or dinner engagements, driven to an airbase that wouldn't be found on most maps, then loaded into the chopper. One of the men wore a dark suit, complemented by a white pullover; the other wore a T-shirt and jeans. One woman cut an elegant figure in a full-length black evening gown complete with black satin opera gloves; the other was decked out in a sweatshirt and jeans one size too small for her wide hips. None of them were entirely certain why they'd been gathered, or where, exactly, they were headed—there hadn't been time for a proper briefing—but they all shared a general sense of how serious the situation must be for them to have been pulled together on such short notice.

The man in the copilot's seat, however, knew exactly what was going on. In his mid-fifties, with severely chiseled features and a dour expression that had apparently resulted in the permanent frown carved across his lips, he was the leader of this nighttime desert excursion. His face was deeply lined, with cavernous furrows that snaked across his high forehead and creases that framed the

corners of his mouth. Short dark hair, graying at the temples, thinning in the back, started at the widow's peak that jutted up well above his eyebrows and fanned out from there. Coupled with dark eyes that gazed at the world from beneath thick brows, most people on meeting him were struck by how much he reminded them of a bird of prey. Or a Neanderthal.

Special Agent Richard Schultz was one of the most highly respected field commanders for the Department of Homeland Security. Appointed to the position by Secretary Tom Ridge himself, Schultz had made an easy transition from the FBI to the antiterrorist organization and wasted no time in earning his keep. His special task force had tracked al Qaeda operatives in the United States, busted up potential terrorist cells in Brooklyn and Chicago and brought to ground the leader of a white supremacist group that had planned to bomb a federal building in Muncie, Indiana. It was the very same team that rode with him now—agents he could count on to drop what they were doing at a moment's notice and join him on the next assignment, no matter where it might lead.

But they had never had an assignment like this one.

"Two minutes to target," the pilot said. He wore a black jumpsuit unmarked by identifying patches or insignia; like the gunship, he didn't officially exist.

Schultz adjusted the thin microphone and bulky headphones that he, like everyone else in the chopper, wore to communicate over the roar of the engine and the loud whipping of the rotor blades. "How close can you get us?"

"I can put you right in the middle of the action if you want, sir," the pilot replied. "The whole area's been locked down for ten miles square. Hazmat teams have already run tests—no signs of radioactivity or chemical traces. They think the chance of there being any airborne pathogens is minimal." He pointed to a small computer screen in the center of the helicopter's main control panel. Displayed on it was a line drawing of an aerial view which represented some small settlement that lay past the horizon. "How about the town square? That's where they've got the command post set up."

"Then that'll do fine." Schultz twisted around in his seat to face his team. "When we touch down, you'll find the mobile HQ in front of the post office." He pointed at their clothes and smiled, although forcing his mouth to curl upward was always a challenge. "It'll give you folks a chance to change into something more suitable."

"That's fine, Rich," said Aisha Fletcher, the woman in the evening gown. "But just where *are* we touching down?"

"Burgess, Arizona," Schultz replied. "Population: two hundred." The frown slid back into position. "At least, that's how many people used to live there—before this morning..."

Burgess wasn't much to look at, from the ground or the air. It had a main, four-lane-wide avenue with a couple of stoplights, side streets lined with homes, proudly displaying neatly tended front lawns and gardens, a few dozen one-story buildings, and a pair of two-story "towers" that must have been regarded as an office complex. It was the kind of town that would get profiled on CNN or *CBS Sunday Morning* for one of those slice-of-life, real Americana types of stories that fill seven or eight minutes of programming time between feature segments. A place where life moves slowly, where there are fourth of July picnics and community Christmas parties, where everybody knows who their neighbors are.

Except there were no neighbors to be found. Anywhere.

"How the hell can an entire town disappear?" Jack Campbell wondered aloud. A blond-haired man in his late twenties, with a powerful physique outlined by the Milwaukee Brewers T-shirt he wore, he stepped from the gunship and tossed his headphones back on the seat. He raised a quizzical eyebrow at Schultz—the only member of the team properly attired for business in a dark suit and blood-red tie.

"It's not the town, Jack, it's the people in it," Schultz corrected. He gestured at the buildings around them. "The town's in perfectly good shape."

"Yeah, if you like buttholes in the middle of nowhere." Parker Bryant clambered out of the chopper to join her fellow agents. She was still wearing the Daffy Duck sweatshirt she'd received as a gift from her husband, Stan, at her thirty-fourth birthday party. Free of the headset, she ran her fingers through her ginger-colored hair in an effort to restore the expensive coiffure she'd treated herself to this afternoon. Her efforts only resulted in puffing out the hair in the front and back; the center still bore evidence of the flattening pressure created by wearing a hard plastic strap across her skull for forty miles of desert.

Schultz nodded. "Fair enough," he conceded. "But even buttholes in the middle of nowhere have their importance."

"Like when the entire population vanishes without a trace?" Aisha asked. Campbell and Schultz turned around to help her out of the passenger compartment. She had to lift the bottom of her gown to avoid tripping over it. She was a light-skinned African-American in her mid-forties, which made her the oldest member of the team, next to Schultz. It wasn't something she liked to be reminded about.

"Oh, I'm sure there are traces somewhere," Schultz replied. "Nobody just winks out of existence without leaving something behind."

"That's what they say about all those planes and ships that went missing in the Bermuda Triangle," Parker said. She smiled slyly at her boss. "I think they're still looking."

A muscular black man with a goatee and a cleanshaven head stepped around from the other side of the gunship. Elmore Rodgers was as businesslike as Schultz when it came to the work they did, but his amused expression as he looked around was the polar opposite to the one etched on his supervisor's face. "Is that what you dragged us all the way here for, Rich? You think we have us a Bermuda Triangle that suddenly formed smack in the middle of the desert?" He leaned against the nose of the chopper and folded his arms across his broad chest. "Hey, man, we're Homeland Security. You want to tell me there's a terrorist cell holed up in the sticks, getting ready to do some damage, I'm all for charging right in and securing the homeland. But a bunch of folks suddenly deciding the desert lifestyle wasn't for

them, and pulling up stakes without having the decency to provide the post office with a forwarding address?" He shook his head and chuckled. "Isn't there some nutzo branch of the FBI that handles crap like this?"

"Orders are orders, Elmo," Schultz replied. "Ours is not to reason why-"

"Ours is just to shut the hell up and get some answers," Elmore interjected.

Schultz nodded. "Perceptive as ever, Elmo. You'll make a fine field commander someday." He gestured across the square, toward an oversized, eight-wheeled recreational vehicle that looked big enough to carry a platoon of soldiers. "Now, if you ladies and gentlemen would kindly step into the mobile HQ to change, we'll get this show on the road."

The army had been tasked with sealing off the town, but the search for the residents, or any clues to where they might have gone, had been delayed until Schultz and his team arrived. Now it began in earnest, with teams of soldiers making sweeps from house to house, business to business. They found a variety of cats and dogs, parakeets and goldfish, hamsters and iguanas, but no owners.

Homeland Security didn't fare much better. Dressed in dark blue fatigues, to distinguish them from the military—except for Schultz, who opted to keep his suit—they started at the post office and moved on from there in a rectangular pattern, checking every street, every alley in Burgess, stopping only long enough to check with the other patrols for updates on their progress. But no matter how many doors they opened, no matter how many basements and attics and closets they poked their heads into, not one blessed soul in the entire town turned up.

The rising sun found them back in the square, tired and frustrated. While the others headed for the mobile headquarters for some much-needed coffee, Schultz leaned against the gunship and watched the changing sky. Cotton candy-hued clouds drifted lazily across a

canvas of warm pinks and shimmering lavenders, pushed along by a light breeze that skimmed across the arid landscape. To the west, the stars were still very much in evidence, their distant lights apparently unwilling to dim in order to accommodate the approaching day. Schultz's eyes narrowed as he stared at one in particular that seemed brighter than the rest. Was it moving?

"Agent Schultz?"

He started and whipped his head around to see who had crept up on him. Standing a few feet away was Major Simon Banner, one of the officers who'd helped set up the search teams. Banner was tall and wiry, in his late forties, with a wide, flat nose that was probably the result of breaks caused in a brawl or two. His ears stood out from his head like proverbial car doors, and the bristles of an extremely close-cropped military hairstyle were lightly dusted with gray. To the right of Banner was the gunship pilot, apparently ready for another trip; his flight helmet hung loosely in his right hand.

"You have anything for me, major?" Schultz asked.

Banner nodded. "Just got a report from one of our pilots who was flying recon near the perimeter we set up last night. Said he spotted someone wandering across the desert; the direction they were heading from tracks here."

"Best news I've had so far," Schultz replied. He stepped around the helicopter to check on the status of his team. They were sitting around, drinking coffee from Styrofoam cups. "Ladies and gentlemen!" he called out. "If it's not too much trouble, would you please get your asses in the chopper, pronto? There's a fella we need to see about a missing town."

The DHS members scrambled immediately and hurried to join Schultz and the pilot as they clambered into their seats. The rotors were already starting to spin by the time Campbell, Bryant, Rodgers, and Fletcher had strapped themselves in.

Jack leaned forward, a smug grin lighting his features. "I thought towns didn't go missing, Rich—just the people."

Schultz put on his headset and adjusted the microphone. "Shut up."

The flight took about three minutes, and Schultz noticed they weren't the first to arrive. Two other helicopters had reached the scene—one medical, one armed—and a half-dozen uniformed men and women were gathered around a man lying on a stretcher.

Schultz was out of the gunship before it had completely landed, jogging in a crouch until he was sure he was a safe distance from the rotor blades. He hurried over to the group, flashing his badge and ID for anyone who might question why he was barging in, and came to a halt before the patient.

The man looked like he'd spent a night wandering in the desert. He was shoeless, dressed in a sleeveless T-shirt—known colloquially as a "wife-beater," because it seemed to be the popular wardrobe choice of abusive husbands everywhere—and baggy jeans. A thick layer of dust and sand coated him from head to toe, giving him an almost ghostly appearance. His skin, tough and leathery from life in a harsh climate, made it hard to determine his age, which could have been anywhere from mid-thirties to late fifties. His brown eyes were wide and staring, like he'd experienced something so horrible he could still see it. His dry, cracked lips moved silently.

Schultz turned to one of the medics, a cute-looking woman with a button nose and a pageboy hairstyle. Her nametag read "SPIGNESI." "What's his status?"

"Well, he's dehydrated and delusional," she replied, "but I don't think the latter was caused by lack of water. When we got here, he refused treatment—kept saying he was "beyond saving," whatever the hell that was supposed to mean. It took three men just to strap him down."

"Can I question him?"

Spignesi shrugged. "You can, but I'm not sure what good it'll do you. Maybe in a couple of days, when we've got his condition stabilized."

"I wish I had that kind of time," Schultz replied. He walked up to the stretcher, noting the arrival of his team, but not addressing them.

The man's lips were still moving and the agent leaned over to try to hear what he was saying.

"Damned..." the man whispered hoarsely. "We're all damned..."

Well, Schultz thought, *this* should make for an interesting conversation. "Sir, my name is Special Agent Schultz, of the Department of Homeland Security. Can you tell me what happened in Burgess?"

"Left me behind..." the man croaked. "Wasn't worthy enough..."

"Sir?" Schultz cut in, a bit louder. "I need you to tell me what happened in your town two days ago. What caused all of you to abandon it in such a hurry?"

The man stopped talking, and he turned his head toward the DHS agent. "W-what?"

"Where did all your neighbors go?" Schultz demanded.

For a moment, the glaze that had settled over the man's eyes cleared, and Schultz saw a look of such absolute terror come into them that he actually took a step back. "They took them!" the man screamed.

He began shaking, and Schultz moved aside to let Spignesi rush forward with her partner to check vital signs. The man closed his eyes as tears began forming, and he sobbed loudly. "They came and took them all, even that old biddy, Gladys Wetherall, but not *me*. I didn't want to listen, didn't want to know. Told them to go to hell." His sobbing turned into a poor attempt at a laugh. "But that's where *I'm* going, not them: straight to hell."

"Who *was* it, sir?" Schultz asked. "Who took them?"

The man held his right hand up as high as the restraining strap would allow, then pointed his index finger at the sky. "It was *them*. Came and took everybody. Left me behind..."

Schultz followed the direction of the accusatory finger as it stabbed toward the west.

If that brighter-than-normal star was still in the heavens, still moving about, he couldn't see it.

TWO

The whole damn world was out to destroy him.

Vince Hansen had come to that conclusion a long time ago, but never in his thirty-one years of existence had it seemed to be such an inarguable truth as it had during the last two months. First, there was that dumbass cop pulling him over on San Marco Place for running a red light. What was the big deal? So he'd had a few beers at the Terminal Bar before he got behind the wheel. It wasn't like he'd been swerving all over the road. Besides, he'd seen that SUV in plenty of time to stop. But no, the cop *had* to give him a breathalyzer test, followed by a ticket for Driving Under the Influence.

Number eighty-seven in a series. Collect 'em all.

Then Lea had called it quits with him. Said she'd gotten sick of him never trying to make something of himself. Wanted more out of her life than a dead-end job and a drunken lout who was never going to grow up. Well, who asked her to waitress at the Terminal? It sure as hell wasn't him. He thought she should've taken the "exotic dancing" gig over at the Pelican Briefs. Lea sure had the body for the job, even in her late twenties; she would've been swimming in tips before you knew it. But no, why take her boyfriend's advice when she could be mopping up puke and slapping ass-grabby drunks for minimum wage?

He still wasn't certain just what it was he'd said that'd sent her storming out the door. Well, she'd come around one day.

And then the other shoe had dropped, even before the door had completely hit Lea on the ass on her way out: Frank Rizzo had called to let him know his services would no longer be required down at the Gas 'N Lube. Apparently, Vince had shown up late for work just once too often and that was when he showed up for work at all. That kind of crap was no longer going to be tolerated. He could stop by on Friday and pick up his last check.

Fired. Again.

Not that working the overnight shift at a gas station was any great shakes to begin with. The hours were long, the work tedious, the

possibility of having a gun stuck in his face while some hyperactive jerkwad wearing pantyhose on his head demanded he clean out the cash register too great. And the pay, well, at least it kept a roof over his head. *Used* to keep, that is. Still, somewhere along the line, Vince had convinced himself (foolishly, as it turned out) that this would be a job he could hold for more than six months.

It was more like five months and three days. Always nice to know the record was still held by a Friolator job he'd had at a fast food joint when he was eighteen.

And the hits just kept on coming. He couldn't file for unemployment payments because he'd been working off the books at the gas station—a strict cash exchange for his services so he wouldn't have to report the income. Some bright idea that turned out to be.

Then he had to turn to Scott for a loan to pay off last year's taxes before the Internal Revenue Service took away his house. Now he was up to his eyeballs in debt to his little brother to the tune of three thousand dollars.

Sure, as Scott often pointed out, he could put the house up for sale and eventually pay back everyone he owed money to (including Lea), maybe even have a little spending cash left over for himself. Accountants like him always looked at situations like this in terms of dollars and cents. But the thought of abandoning their parents' home—the place where the brothers Hansen had grown up, a place with so many memories—had a tendency to shove that particular consideration waaay back into the shadowy depths of Vince's mind. Until the next time the bills were due.

And now, just to top everything off, he'd gotten a letter from Corporate Uno, officially notifying him that they were about to cut off his last credit card. Well, there were only so many black clouds Vince Hansen could stand to have hanging over his head. The time had come to change the weather forecast, one way or another.

Ten minutes on the phone to plead his case, and already he was hating this woman with a passion.

He had no idea what she looked like or where she was located—with American companies outsourcing their customer service centers these days, she could be in the middle of Bangladesh, for all he knew. But from the sharp New York accent that assaulted his ears, he'd formulated a mental image of a shrew who looked like Fran Drescher from that TV show, *The Nanny*, only nowhere near as pretty, and with the nasal factor in her voice cranked up to eleven. And *Christ*, did she like to hear herself talk.

"Yeah, yeah, hold on. Lemme speak, okay?" Vince yelled. Much to his surprise, she actually shut up. He paused a moment, trying to hold on to what little patience he still possessed. "Now, look: *you* bozos asked *me* if I wanted to increase my credit limit. What was I gonna say? 'No'? How the hell did I know *I* was gonna be laid off?"

"I understand your problem, Mr Hansen, but considering the outstanding balance on your credit card that's involved..."

"Hey, I don't need *you* tellin' me how much I owe!" he snapped. "You wanna know how much I owe my ex-girlfriend? Or maybe I oughtta tell you about the three grand I owe my brother? You think I like drownin' in debt, lady?"

The ice queen's nasal tone whistled frostily through the receiver. "I *wish* there was something we could for you, Mr Hansen—"

"Look," Vince interjected, "you can't cancel my card." He winced, annoyed that he couldn't keep the pleading whine out of his voice. "I got bills up the yin-yang. They're gonna shut off my water, maybe even my electricity by the end of the week. I gotta be able to pay my bills. Don't you get that?"

"I'm sorry, Mr Hansen—"

"Yeah?" Vince barked. "Well, 'sorry' doesn't do squat to help me!"

He punched the "off" button on the mobile phone to end the conversation, then tossed the device onto the battered coffee table in front of him. It clattered across the dark wood surface, scattering magazines and empty beer cans before tumbling over the side to thump dully on the carpet below. Vince shook his head forlornly. He wished he still had one of those old-fashioned rotary phones, like when his parents owned the house. Then he would've at least had the satisfaction of slamming down the receiver on that bitch.

And if wishes were horses, beggars would ride, as his mother used to say. She was always saying stupid things like that back in the day, like they were pearls of wisdom instead of the lame-ass Chinese fortune cookie messages they always sounded like. Maybe that's why he'd never paid attention to a lot of what she had to say when he was growing up: as a parent, she made a lousy Confucius. Not that she or Dad made such great parents, either.

With a sharp exhale of breath, he ran his hands through his short blond hair, kneading his scalp with his fingertips to try and relieve the headache he could feel building. It didn't do much good, but it was better than pounding his fist against a wall in frustration, although he'd probably wind up doing that, too, in time.

He glanced at the clock built into the cable box that sat on top of the television. Nine am, and already the day was a complete waste.

"That calls for some kind of celebration," he muttered sarcastically. His mood brightened considerably as he spotted an open can of beer at the far end of the coffee table. "Ask, and ye shall receive..." He chuckled hollowly.

There wasn't much left of the forty ounces that had filled the can when he'd bought it—a quick shake of it was proof enough—but since it represented the last Colt 45 in the house, it was better than nothing. He'd never been much of a coffee drinker. Besides, waste not, want not, as Mom used to say. Well, she was right about *that* one.

He snatched up the can, took a deep swig and immediately regretted it. Flat, warm beer caused his lips to pull back in a sneer as the taste of stale hops withered his tongue. Trying hard not to swallow the rancid brew, and hoping he wouldn't gag from the small amount that had already trickled down his throat, Vince dashed into the kitchen. He was spitting into the sink even before he reached the stainless steel basin.

"Damn it!" he said, grimacing. That oughtta teach him to leave beers out overnight. Well, it wasn't like he'd planned to do it. He'd just been so blitzed he'd forgotten to put it back in the refrigerator. With a sigh, he poured the rest down the drain, tossed the can in the garbage, and stomped back to the living room.

It was while he was passing the hallway table that held the base for the cordless phone that he noticed the message light blinking on the answering machine next to it. He didn't remember anyone calling last night, but that was no real surprise because he always kept the sound off. That way, he didn't. have to be bothered by telemarketers. Or bill collectors. Still, he thought, it wouldn't kill him to find out who called; maybe Lea had undergone a change of heart. He thumbed the volume control up to "5" and pressed the "play" button.

"Vince, hey. It's Doyle Lipton. Don't know what your schedule's like lately, but I might have some work available in the next couple of days if you're interested. Give me a call in the morning when you get a chance: 555-8679."

Okay, not Lea, but something potentially even better: a job. Lipton ran a small wood shop down on Peekskill Road that provided building contractors with decorative molding for apartments and houses. Vince had done work for him a few times over the past three or four years, but employment was always spotty: a couple days one week, an afternoon a month later. The pay was good, though; better than good. That was probably Doyle's way of lessening the chance of a lawsuit if one of the guys got a finger sliced off in the molder. A well-paid working stiff was a happy working stiff, after all, even with the top of his pinkie lying among the sawdust. And once the screaming and the bleeding and the emergency room expenses had faded into oblivion, it was a sure bet Lipton would be on the phone to the guy, asking him to come in for another short-term gig. And he would greet him the next morning as though nothing had ever happened. Vince had seen it happen once, last year, to Charley Maars of all people; the most safety-minded guy in the shop. It's why everybody called him "Stubby" after that.

Vince, thankfully, had never had a bad experience with a molder, but he and Lipton *had* butted heads a time or two over the topic of a regular job. Lipton didn't like to have a large staff—medical benefits, he kept pointing out, were costly enough with two employees on the payroll, and he wasn't looking to add a third. He'd admitted that Vince was one of the most skilled freelancers he'd ever met, but stressed that times were tough all over: when a building owner can

walk into Home Depot and buy as much prefabricated molding as he wants, it tends to cut into the profit margin of struggling small businesses. Vince hadn't seen it that way, of course. If his work was so good, then Lipton was only hurting himself by not making him a full-timer. That was pretty much the point, every time they really got into it, where the discussion degenerated into a shouting match liberally sprinkled with a wide variety of colorful phrases about woodworking equipment and its suggested uses in regard to human orifices. And yet, no matter how skilled Vince might be in expressing his frustrations in four-letter-word combinations, it always ended up with him slamming the door behind him as he exited Lipton's office—with no regular paycheck to count on.

Well, maybe this time would be different. Maybe this time he wouldn't have to do so much convincing. Maybe that acne-ridden little turd had finally woken up and realized Vince Hansen was a guy worth taking on.

Hell, he couldn't be a loser all his life, could he?

"It'd be a nice change for once..." Vince muttered.

He continued on to the living room and flopped down on the couch, pushing aside newspapers (mostly want ad sections) until he found the remote control for the television. He turned on the TV, then the cable box, and waited for both to warm up. The sound came on first.

"*Pzzzt*—in these times of heightened security, the sudden failure of the global satellite network has understandably increased world tensions," a newscaster was saying. The picture that formed on the screen was of a large newsroom about the size of a football field, the control center for the Cable Journalism Network. In the foreground, behind a desk, sat the anchorman, Grahan Miller. In his early sixties, dark hair heavily streaked with gray, features aged considerably from a life spent mainly in the field, Miller was one of those old-style journalists that news channels often relied on to provide stability to a broadcast otherwise filled with a collection of reporters in their twenties and thirties. He was a man who delivered the facts without cutesy mannerisms and false smiles; a straight-shooter who didn't sugarcoat the truth in times of crisis. When this guy was behind the

desk, Vince felt like he could trust him, the way his parents used to rely on Walter Cronkite; probably most people in the country felt the same way.

And if Graham Miller was as worried as Vince thought he looked right at this moment, then the world must be on the verge of falling apart.

"It was little more than thirty-six hours ago," Miller continued, "that the first indications of trouble became apparent to the United States, with the loss of long distance communications. Early unconfirmed reports point to the blackout originating in Russia, then spreading across Europe. In an official statement from the Department of Homeland Security, Secretary Tom Ridge stated that there is no proof at this time to link the loss of satellite transmissions to al Qaeda or other such terrorist organizations, since none have stepped forward to take credit, and that it is unlikely this event will reach US shores. He urged the American people to remain calm while the matter is investigated..." He paused for a moment, and gently placed a hand to the tiny receiver he wore in his left ear. Obviously, he was receiving instructions from the director in the control room. "I've just been informed that we're approximately fifteen minutes away from the start of an emergency session of the United Nations Security Council."

The camera pulled back and to the left, just enough to provide room for a flowchart graphic to appear next to Miller's head. "In related news, the latest C/JN/*New York Times* polls show that, despite assurances from the White House, the American public has begun to feel the increased tensions."

Vince grunted. "Some of us more than others, Graham." He pressed the remote and turned off the TV; he had enough tensions of his own without having to hear about other people's. So, long distance was screwed up in France? Who cared? It wasn't like he knew anybody over there to call. Hell, he didn't even have a cell phone. Let the phone company deal with that crap if it happened; as long as his cable box didn't go out and he still got to watch *South Park* every night, folks could talk to each other with tin cans tied together with string as far as he was concerned. His only focus was

on getting back on the work force and then taking another shot at getting back with Lea. All he needed was that one chance for things to finally go his way, to be able to prove himself...

And that, as if on cue, was when the doorbell rang.

Vince looked at the cable box clock. It was twenty past nine. Someone at the door this early in the morning could only mean trouble; maybe someone from collection agency come to seize his car as collateral for one of his unpaid debts, even as broken-down as the Camaro was. He sunk lower on the couch, hoping they hadn't already seen the top of his head when they had no doubt peered through the windows in the front of the house.

The bell sounded again. Then the knocking on the door started. And then, "Hello?" A woman's voice. "Mr Hansen? Are you home?" The call alternated. with the ringing and the knocking. She sure as hell was persistent for a bill collector.

"All right!" Vince finally barked. "I'm coming! I'm coming!"

The assault came to an abrupt and welcome end.

With a loud sigh, he forced himself off the couch, onto his feet, and went to greet his visitor. He unlocked the deadbolt, slipped off the safety chain, and opened the door just wide enough to wedge his body through the gap—there was no way she was getting inside.

Not *she*, he discovered. *They*.

There was a man standing next to her.

He looked like one of those *GQ* model types, all straight body lines and tanned skin. His dark, collar-length hair was swept back from a high forehead, all the better to draw attention to his light-blue eyes, which seemed to shine with an inner light. He flashed the kind of smile guaranteed to dazzle bored housewives before they had a chance to shut the door in his face. The charcoal-gray suit he wore looked like it was worth a couple thousand dollars, tailored to give him just enough room to move without looking baggy, but tight enough to provide a sharp silhouette.

The woman, on the other hand, could have stepped out of the pages of *Maxim*: tall, dark-skinned, and built like the proverbial brick house. A waterfall of wavy black hair cascaded over her shoulders and down to the small of her back. Like her companion,

she wore an expensive outfit, although hers consisted of a black blazer, white blouse, tight black miniskirt and stylish pumps, a combination designed to halt the husbands and bachelors not enticed by Mr *GQ*'s good looks. It certainly brought Vince up short. He'd been expecting an overweight, loudmouthed harpy, waving around a collection notice when he opened the door, not some Tyra Banks clone. Not that he was complaining. This one sure had a nice pair of legs.

"Hello, Vince," the man said.

Vince's gaze snapped up from the woman's well-toned thighs to center on her partner's face. His brow furrowed, and he looked suspiciously at his visitor. "I know you?"

"I'm Muriel," the woman answered in a honey-laced voice before her partner could say anything. She gestured toward him. "And this is Michael." She smiled sweetly. "May we come in?"

Vince frowned. "Look, if you're selling something..."

"We're not selling anything," Michael interjected. Politely.

"Good," Vince said sharply. "Cause I can't afford anything."

Muriel stepped forward. Nice perfume she was wearing, like the kind Lea used to wear. "You've been Chosen, Vince."

One of his eyebrows did a slow rise. "For what?"

Michael smiled as wide as the grill on a '58 Cadillac. "We're here to offer you a chance at a whole new life."

"Uh-huh." Vince flashed his own smile—a completely insincere one—then nodded. "I knew it." He stepped back inside to close the door. "Goodb—"

And then Muriel's hand was suddenly grasping the edge of the faded wood portal. He pushed harder to force her back, but she wasn't moving; neither was the door. "You're not listening, Vince. You've been *Chosen*."

"Yeah, well maybe I don't *wanna* be 'chosen.' You ever considered that?" He put more of his weight on the door, and nodded toward her hand. "I'd hate to see those pretty little fingers get slammed."

"There's no need for violence, Vince," Michael said. "If you'd just give us a few minutes of your time, we'd be more than happy to explain in detail how we're here to help you."

Vince laughed sharply, a quick barking note. "You wanna help me? I need a job. A little cash in my pocket. You can get those for me? Well, that's terrific! And while you're at it, how about helping me get my girlfriend back?"

Michael slowly shook his head; he looked disappointed. "What we're offering is a little bit more substantial."

"Really." Vince's lips pulled back in a feral snarl. "Well, I'm offering you both the chance to get the hell off my property before I come out there and kick your asses!"

Now, it was Muriel's turn to show disappointment. With a tiny sigh, she released the door and stepped back, but neither she nor Michael moved to leave. Instead, she reached into her handbag and pulled out a small box, a DVD case. There was no label on it, no box art or description to give a hint as to what was inside. She held it out toward Vince.

"What's this?"

"It's a gift," Michael replied. "A small token of appreciation for the time you've given us."

That should have come across as a snide comment, Vince knew, but it didn't; in fact, it actually sounded sincere. There was just no way to figure out these two and he wasn't in the mood to try. With a noncommittal shrug, he accepted the box. "Okay, but whatever it is, I ain't buying."

A hint of a smile crept back on to Michael's face. "Don't be so sure, Vince."

The smile widened as he looked to Muriel; she returned it in kind. And then, with a small wave to Vince, they turned and walked off. Heading for the Hendersons next door, no doubt.

Vince slammed his door anyway, just to make sure they knew who was boss.

He walked back to the living room, holding the DVD case in his left hand while he tapped it between the middle finger and thumb of his right hand, a tuneless beat he'd been drumming in that same manner since he was a teenager, whether he was holding a book, a video, or a CD. Half the time he wasn't even aware he was doing it, right up to the moment he stopped. As for this particular solo performance, the

rhythm ended when he began turning the case over in his hands. There were still no markings, no labels to be seen—not that he'd expected any to suddenly show up—but for some reason he couldn't explain, he was reluctant to look at its contents. A feeling, maybe, that doing so might just open a whole Pandora's Box of brand-new troubles.

"Aw, that's just stupid," he told himself, and firmly gripped the edges of the case in his fingers. It made a soft popping sound as he pulled the halves apart. Inside was a silvery DVD, also devoid of labeling.

No, not entirely devoid. There was a name engraved in gold calligraphy across the disk's surface. *His* name.

"They think of everything, don't they?" Vince muttered sarcastically. He shrugged. "All part of the hard sell, I guess. Wouldn't kill 'em to pay for some box art if they really wanted to get folks' attention."

And yet he didn't toss the package in the trash. Instead, he turned on the TV and plopped the disk into the DVD player underneath. True, he still had that nagging feeling he shouldn't be doing this, that he'd probably come to regret it later, but he figured as long as the disk was free, what harm would it do just to check it out? Besides, if he didn't like what the Beautiful People were offering the "chosen," the garbage can was only a few steps away.

He pressed the "play" button on the remote. The television screen remained blank for a few seconds, then an image appeared without benefit of titles or credits or even an FBI warning about the fines and penalties that could be handed out for illegally duplicating the disk's contents. A man sat comfortably in a leather chair, hands folded on the desk in front of him. He was another one of the Beautiful People, of course, tanned, handsome, in his early twenties, and dressed like a talk show host on one of those late-night infomercials. But there were no combination fish scaler/wine bottle openers to be seen, no phone numbers or product codes scrolling across the bottom of the screen, no impassioned directives to Call Now because operators were standing by to take your order. Just a fair-haired man in a light

gray suit, staring right into the camera. He smiled beatifically, unfolded his hands, and steepled his fingers.

"Hey, there, Vince," he began, speaking softly. "Now we know you've had some disappointments recently. Things look pretty bleak from your point of view—am I right? But you're probably used to that by now." A small frown pulled at the corners of his mouth. "Yeah, I guess, looking back on your life, there's not much to be proud of."

"Screw you!" Vince shouted as he pounded the arm of the couch. Then he hit it again, frustrated at his stupid reaction. What exactly did he hope to accomplish by yelling at the TV?

"You were a problem kid, after all," the man continued. "Barely made it through high school, almost wound up in a juvenile facility over those petty thefts, racked up a fair amount of DUIs. As a teenager and as an adult. And that temper of yours..." He shook his head. "Is it any wonder Lea dumped you?"

"How..." Vince whispered, almost unable to speak. "How the hell...?"

"And the job situation? It's like, what? Two months here, six months there. What's up with that?" Another shake of the head, followed by a drawn-out sigh. "But you don't need *me* to remind you that failure sticks to you like gum on a shoe, right?"

"Son of a bitch!" Vince snapped. It took him a moment to realize he was shaking lightly; the damn thing was starting to spook him. Who the hell were these people? How could they know so much about him? And where the hell did they get off acting so high-and-mighty about how he lived his life? He snatched up the remote to turn off the TV. "I don't need to listen to this crap."

The pitchman raised his hand as if to wave off Vince's comment, then pointed an index straight at him, like a collector pinning a butterfly to a display board. "But you and I both know there's more to Vince Hansen than the record shows."

Okay, so that got his attention. Despite the embers that still smoldered angrily behind his eyes, Vince paused in mid-click, then slowly placed the remote on the coffee table. He was suddenly curious to see where this was going.

The pitchman leaned forward in his chair, the camera zooming in closer so Vince could clearly see the intensity of his expression. "There's something inside you, Vince; something worth rescuing. Something that deserves a second chance. Maybe you haven't realized it yet, or maybe you've known it all along and just never admitted it to yourself. The how and the why don't really matter; what does is that *we*—my friends and I—know how special you really are. That's why you've been contacted." The impassioned look that seemed to bore straight through Vince slowly melted into a warm, friendly smile. "That's why you've been Chosen."

The picture went black at that point, the message apparently delivered.

Vince stared at the television for a minute longer, locking eyes with the confused couch potato who gazed back at him from the darkened screen. Then he turned off the TV and tossed aside the remote.

"Well, that's just great," he muttered with a sneer. "Nice to know I'm wanted. But just what the hell am I supposed to be chosen for?"

THREE

Speed Moorcock hated watching the world go by.

Time was, it used to be the world sitting on the sidelines, watching *him* as he tore through the streets on his Harley Davidson XLS Roadster like he was trying to outrace the wind. Usually, he won. But the races had been over for years, and now the wind always made it to the finish line first, pausing long enough to flip him the bird as it whipped past his wheelchair.

Sometimes he couldn't believe how much his life—hell, his whole damn world—had changed because of one stupid wipeout. It wasn't that he had much to show for his time on Earth before the accident. He had never held a steady job, never made a great deal of money, never stayed in one place too long, never started a family (although there were probably a few bastard kids scattered across the country he'd had something to do with). But did he have to lose the one thing he was good at? One damn patch of black ice on an otherwise clear road in the middle of winter and *whoops!* Sorry, buddy. Looks like you're outta luck. Kinda made it hard for a man to live up to his nickname when the only velocity he was able to motor-vate under came from how strong a push his hands were able to give the tire rims. Still, "Speed" sounded a helluva lot better than his real name.

To gaze upon him now, one could only wonder how he got the nickname. In his mid-forties, dark, shoulder-length hair and chest-reaching beard shot through with gray, face lined with creases and scars, he had all the good looks of the proverbial twenty miles of bad road. The ever-widening belly didn't help matters; at two hundred and forty pounds, he was a long way from the muscular two hundred and ten he used to sport in his glory days. He could still swing a vicious bike chain in a fight—the accident hadn't taken away any of his upper body strength—but his legs had atrophied over the last six years, even with regular physical therapy sessions down at the free clinic. As he often told his running-buddies in the Guardians, back when they used to visit, that is, he used to look like the lead singer of a band; now he looked like one of the roadies. His choice of clothing,

though, was clearly meant to be a reminder of the Good Ol' Days: black boots under faded black jeans and a black T-shirt with a painted image of the Grim Reaper riding a Harley FXR chopper on the front. Printed on the back, in large red letters, was a caution to motorists: "IF YOU CAN READ THIS, THE BITCH FELL OFF!" A red, black-patterned bandana was tied around his head, mainly to keep his hair in place, but also to prevent sweat from getting in his eyes. All in all, he still thought he cut one helluva rugged figure, even with the beer gut.

And speaking of beers, he considered, he sure could go for a cold one right about now.

A trio of musical chimes from the boom box, a scratched and dented antique that sat on the window sill next to him, drew his attention. "It's one o'clock, and time for the news," said a female anchor in a serious tone. "I'm Laurel Ash, with the stories that are making headlines."

Speed only paid partial interest to the newscast, his gaze having fallen on a sweet little looker in red shorts and white T-shirt, jogging at a steady pace through the block. Her red hair tied back in a ponytail that bobbed up and down with each stride, the woman looked to be in her early twenties and fit enough to outdistance Speed even if he still had use of his legs. He offered a lascivious greeting as she passed his house, but the iPod headphones securely clamped over her ears kept her from hearing it. It was probably for the best, he reflected; the last thing he needed was another harassment charge added to an already arm-length rap sheet.

"The continuing failure to restore global satellite communications is causing a growing sense of unease among scientists and world leaders, who are still unable to agree on the cause of the disturbance," said the anchor-woman. "At this morning's emergency session of the United Nations General Assembly, equipment malfunctions, software glitches, increased sunspot activity, even terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda and Hamas were suggested as possible reasons behind the breakdowns, but no conclusive evidence to support any of these claims has, as yet, been presented. In related news, the Department of Homeland Security announced.

just over an hour ago that the nation's alert status has been elevated to Level Orange, and all branches of the armed forces have been placed on standby—"

As the jogger reached the end of the block, Speed reached over and turned off the box. It seemed every time he turned on the radio, there was nothing but news about bad things going on in the world: wars, terrorist attacks, food shortages, riots, labor strikes, murders, earthquakes, fires. It was like the planet was coming apart at the seams, like all this pervading badness was building up to something. Well, that's what he got for listening to National Public Radio instead of a classic rock station. For a few seconds, he thought about rolling his chair inside and throwing a Led Zeppelin CD on the stereo, but it was too nice a day to go back in the house. Besides, the bass-deep thrum of a worn-out muffler he now heard from an approaching car—a window-rattling vibration that assaulted the peace and quiet of the block, sending children and small animals running for cover—could only mean one thing. Vince Hansen was coming to visit.

Sure enough, the crapped-up Camaro turned the corner and rumbled up the street, setting off car alarms on both sides. Speed closed his eyes and smiled, letting the vibrations wash over him. They reminded him of the sensation he used to get when he was riding, the Harley's powerful engine booming away between his legs. Better'n sex, that feeling, but it was a long time gone, and he was never getting it back and that, unfortunately, was God's honest truth. With a heavy heart, Speed shook his head and opened his eyes.

Vince pulled the car into the short driveway that lay to the right side of Speed's house. As soon as he cut the engine, serenity returned to the block: birds starting chirping again, kids came out of hiding to stare at the mechanical monster that had ruined their fun and from where Speed was sitting, he could once more hear the constant musical playback of the "Mr Softee" theme as one of the company's ice cream trucks moved through the neighborhood.

Vince opened his door and reached over to the passenger seat to retrieve a large paper bag before he stepped from the car. He noticed Speed, smiled broadly and waved in greeting. "Hey, man. How's it hangin'?"

"To the left—" Speed slapped his inner thigh "—not that it's doin' me any good today." He shrugged. "But as long as the pipes work, there'll always be plenty o' Moorcock for the ladies to enjoy. Know what I mean?"

"Regular freakin' love machine you are, buddy," Vince said with a laugh. He climbed up the porch steps to shake hands with his friend.

Speed grinned. "I'm crippled, pal, not dead. Big difference." He gestured toward the paper bag. "What'cha got for me, slick?"

"The essentials, what else?" Vince handed it over, then flopped down on the weather-beaten couch that, along with an old card table and a couple of folding chairs, served as patio furniture. The ancient springs groaned under his weight as he settled into the threadbare cushions.

Speed placed the bag on his lap and reached in. He pulled out a string of lottery tickets and smiled at Vince. "Feelin' lucky today."

"Jackpot's supposed to be around twenty million."

"That oughtta do me just fine," Speed said wistfully.

"Got plans for the money?" Vince asked.

"Better believe it," Speed replied. He slapped the arm of his wheelchair. "First thing I'd do is trade in this piece of crap for one'a those motorized babies, then hire the guys on that *American Chopper TV* show to tear it apart and customize me something that can really *move*, know what I mean?"

"Oh, yeah," Vince said with a grin. "Thousand cc engine?"

"Uh-huh, for starts. Chrome Package, Dunlop tires, couple saddlebags, Sampson street sweeper exhaust, maybe some detailing on the sides... Hell, maybe they could even hook up a nitrous oxide line for a little kick when I need to get around some blue-haired granny ridin' one'a those little electric scooter-things." Speed sighed. "Yeah, that'd be a thing'a beauty."

It was an old conversation with them by now; one that usually took place whenever the state lottery reached a level guaranteed to jump-start Speed's daydream machinery. He didn't need a whole lot of money—he was a simple guy with simple needs—but disability payments didn't do much for him beyond taking care of some of the bills. A few million dollars would at least give him back a feeling of

independence, of not having to rely on anyone for help... like asking Vince to do his grocery shopping. It wasn't that he resented the assistance, but Vince wasn't much better off than him. No job, no girl, no real prospects, bills up the wazoo. Hell, Vince might even be *worse* off than him.

Maybe, Speed reflected, he wasn't the one who should be investing in lottery tickets.

"Your day'll come, buddy," Vince said quietly, with a level of sincerity that took even Speed by surprise. "Who knows? Maybe it will be tonight."

Speed patted him on the knee and pointed toward the sky. "Hey, from your mouth t'God's ears." His smile quickly faded when he saw the way Vince's face clouded over, then he realized what the trouble was: Mrs Hansen used to use that phrase a lot, didn't she? One of many she often recited from the Good Book of Clichés, he remembered. Maybe it was time to move the conversation along.

He dropped the tickets in his lap and reached deep into the sack, fingers brushing against slick paper, a magazine cover. "What else we got here?" He noticed how Vince sat up a little straighter on the couch, a neat trick considering those old cushions tended to pull at people like quicksand.

It was thick and heavy and Speed had to use both hands to pull it from its brown paper enclosure, but it was worth the struggle when he finally got to look at his prize. With a title like *Spiced Girls Lingerie Special*, no one would have ever mistaken it for a copy of *Better Homes and Gardens*—although the chest of the blonde-haired beauty on the cover was certainly a proud testament to the wonders of manmade construction—but Speed Moorcock wasn't exactly the sort of person one could consider a deep reader. He was more of a "I just like to look at the pictures" kind of guy.

And he wouldn't have had it any other way.

"Awww, yeah. That's what I'm talkin' about." He flipped through the pages, occasionally stopping at a photo or two that caught his eye, then winked slyly at Vince. "A little nighttime reading." He carefully placed it on the floor, then continued rummaging through the bag. One at a time, he extracted four small cans and set them

next to the magazine. As he glanced at each label, he frowned in distaste. "Tuna fish? Again? What am I, a cat?"

"This kind's supposed to be dolphin-safe," Vince said.

Speed laughed. "Like I give a crap. Dolphins just enhance the flavor." He reached back into the bag with one hand while grasping the bottom of the brown paper with the other, then pulled it away in one quick motion, like a magician yanking off a sheet that covered a cage to show that his assistant has been replaced with a tiger. In this performance, however, the part of the tiger was played by a sixpack of Corona beer bottles, still cold from the local grocery.

"Ahhh..." Speed sighed. "Mother's milk." He tossed the bag to the side, not bothering to see where it fell. "What do I owe you, kiddo?"

Vince nodded toward the beer. "Gimme one of those and we'll call it even."

Speed happily passed over one of the bottles. "Opener's on the table." He watched as, with some effort, Vince managed to extricate himself from the Plaid Hole long enough to snag the metal bottle opener before giving in to the pull of gravity. "You're a good neighbor, Vince. I appreciate it."

"Always happy to help, man," Vince said, popping the cap on his bottle. "You know that." He tossed the opener to Speed, who did the same. They *clinked* the long necks in a toast.

"Drop dead," Speed said with a grin.

"You first, Racer X," Vince shot back.

They settled back to drink and watch the world go by.

It was times like this, Speed realized, when he felt the most comfortable, the most at peace with himself. Beer in his hand, good friend hangin' out with him and a little porn on standby to while away the long evening hours. They'd never replace the kind of fun he used to have when he rode with Hell's Guardians—the brawls, the booze, the biker chicks—but that wild life belonged to a younger Speed Moorcock now. The hellraiser. The party animal.

The one who could walk.

He winced at the flash of fragmenting metal and melting rubber that formed in his mind's eye and unconsciously rubbed his right

thigh, like that was going to restore any feeling to it. "How's the job search comin'?" he muttered through gritted teeth.

"I'm seeing Lipton this afternoon," Vince replied, apparently oblivious to the strain in his old buddy's voice. Or maybe he was just being polite. "Says he may have something lined up for me at the shop."

Speed frowned. "Doyle's a surly bastard." He took another swig of beer.

Vince unfurled a slow grin. "So are you."

Speed shrugged. "That's your problem, man," he said matter-of-factly. "You hang out with the wrong kind of people."

"Yeah, well, maybe if I get this job and the money starts coming in, I can start hanging out with some of those high society types," Vince said. He shot a look at Speed. "And I ain't talking about the magazine."

"That's your loss," Speed said. "If you knew any better..."

Vince laughed. "I know plenty about..." His voice suddenly trailed off as something caught his attention. It drained the smile from his face, replaced it with a red-cheeked snarl. "Son of a bitch..."

Speed turned and followed the direction of Vince's angry gaze. A man and woman were just coming out of Al Kurtzman's house across the street. Dressed in dark outfits, the guy was a handsome white dude, the girl a knockout black chick with great legs.

"Damn!" Vince barked. "They still around?"

"What, Michael and Muriel?" Speed asked. "Showed up on your block, huh?"

Vince yanked himself away from the cushions and turned to face his old friend. "They came knocking here, too?"

"Oh, hell, yeah!" Speed replied. "Knockin' on every door in the neighborhood, from what I hear. Them an' a whole bunch of their friends. Old Mrs Peterson down the block told me she saw some of them hangin' out in front of the Starbucks on Ignatius Street, tellin' everybody how they're—" he held up his hands and waggled the index and middle fingers on both, to represent quotation marks "—'chosen.'" He grinned slyly. "Don't seem like such an exclusive

club if everybody an' their brother's bein' asked to join. Know what I mean?" He tilted his head back and sang in his best off-key voice:

"Gimme that old time religion
Gimme that old time religion
Gimme that old time religion
It's good enough for me!"

From the house to the right of Speed's came an answering howl as the Espositos' dachshund, Wilbur, chimed in.

"Maybe God's having a membership drive," Vince said sarcastically.

"Freakin' whackos," Speed snapped. He nodded his head back toward his house. "They left me some video to watch. Had my name engraved on it and everything."

Vince nodded. "They left me a DVD." He paused a moment to watch Michael and Muriel as they moved on to their next target: the Barrons. "You watch it yet?"

Speed grunted. "Why the hell would I?" He took another drink, eyeing Vince over the neck of the bottle, then wiped foam off his lips. "Have you?"

Vince opened his mouth, looked like he was about to say "no," then lowered his head and nodded. "Yeah." He picked at the edge of the Corona label. with a fingernail. "It was weird."

"Weird how?"

Vince shrugged. "It had all this stuff on it." He fell silent and went back to peeling the label.

"What kinda stuff?" Typical Vince, Speed thought. Ask him a question, and he gets all vague with his answers. Sometimes it was like he was dealing with one of those Zen masters you see in the movies, the kind who only speak when they have some grand piece of wisdom to impart, even though the odds are good you'll never understand its true meaning. Mostly, though, it was like beating a dead mule: neither it nor Vince were what you'd call "responsive," no matter how hard you poked and prodded, and in the end all you'd really accomplished was that you'd worn out your arm.

"Personal stuff," Vince finally admitted. "About my life, my past." He looked up and frowned. "They even knew about Lea."

Speed nodded sagely. "Get used to it, buddy. It's what happens when that Old Time Religion meets the Information Superhighway. You can't keep *anything* secret no more."

That was sure as hell true, as Speed could easily attest. Just the other day, while he was surfing the Net (to check out some porn sites, of course), he decided to type his name into the Google search engine, to see what might come up. Well, imagine his surprise when he found a site called "The Biker Hall of Fame" that listed statistics for over fifty kings of the road, an unofficial survey set up by some kind of biker groupie. And right there, at number Thirty-eight, was Speed Moorcock. The stats under his picture—not one of the best mugshots he'd ever taken, thank you very much, Passion, Georgia Police Department—were pretty much what you would've expected: arrest record, club affiliations, hospital stays, blah blah blah. But it also listed two little-known facts about him, secrets he'd worked damn hard to keep buried.

One was his short-lived marriage to a Moreau, New Mexico waitress named Constance Rappacinni, a pneumatically structured little brunette with a pair of bee-stung lips made for sucking the chrome off a tailpipe. It happened back in the summer of 1984, when he and the Guardians had rolled into town on their way to the annual gathering of the nationwide chapters outside Roswell. After riding all day across two states, they'd stopped at the Dead Man's Hand diner ("OPEN ALL NIGHT—TRY OUR CHEF'S SPECIAL!") for an overdue meal: steak and eggs to fuel up, a pile of hash browns and a few gallons of coffee. But once he set eyes on the cute little honey with the big hooters—a rack that strained the fabric of her light-blue waitress uniform like a dam about to burst—Speed lost no time in offering her his own Chef's Special that night: a big order of tube-steak, seasoned to taste.

He wound up serving it to her out back next to the dumpster, his fingers twined through handfuls of thick, lustrous chestnut-brown hair.

Yeah, he'd always had a way with the ladies.

It was a night to remember, even twenty years and thirty pounds later, full of the sort of carnal pleasures he'd only read about in the

Penthouse letters pages. Most folks usually wouldn't expect a smalltown girl to know how to do half the stuff she did to him, but Speed knew from experience that it was always the most repressed types of chicks who turned out to be the real freaks in bed. Putting the moves on that dark-haired beauty had turned out to be, in his humble opinion, the absolute height of inspiration.

The quickie marriage, though, now that was a dumbass idea. Too much booze, too many pills, too little sleep, and suddenly he was whispering sweet nothings in her ear, like "Will you marry me?" Of course he hadn't meant it. Hell, back then, he would've said just about anything to get laid. And he sure hadn't expected her to take him so seriously, but when she'd said yes, well, it had sounded like a good idea at the time.

Getting the hell outta town as fast as his hog could take him sounded even better after he sobered up three days later.

The other factoid was his real first name—an anchor his parents had looped around his neck at birth, before he had any chance of debating the issue, never realizing the years of schoolyard abuse that lay ahead for their only child.

Eugene.

What kinda man with any sense of dignity, especially a member of Hell's Guardians, would've gone through life allowing people to ever call him by such a stupid name? The ones who tried ended up having their skulls cracked if they said it to his face, as it turned out; after that, they learned to call him "Speed." Sure, he swiped it from his favorite cartoon character, Speed Racer, but nobody laughed at it, not a second time, anyway. And the chicks were always trying to find out firsthand whether the nickname stood for his prowess on a chopper or the skill with which he so quickly brought them to climax. Sometimes, they found it hard to tell the difference.

Yeah, those were the days.

"So, what can we do about it?" Vince asked. Speed stared blankly at him, still lost in reverie. "The Information Superhighway, what can we do about it?"

"Oh." Speed shook his head to clear it and drank the remainder of his Corona in one long pull. He slammed the bottle down on the card

table and belched loudly. "We can have another beer."

Vince seemed to consider it for a moment or two, then shrugged.
"That's good enough for me."

FOUR

The world was coming to an end. At least that's what the Raggedy Man insisted was happening.

Standing on the corner at the intersection of Vitus Place and Uriel Avenue, he waved a sign bearing his proclamation. Most passersby ignored the sign and him, so he took to stepping directly into their paths in order to personally deliver the message.

"They're here!" he roared. "They're among us!"

Vince spotted him even before he pulled into the parking space on the street; the way the old man was carrying on, it was hard to miss him. Coarse gray stubble blanketed his jaw, making sunken cheeks appear skeletal and hooded eyes even darker and wilder. He might've been in his sixties, but years of obvious neglect made him look even older. Decked out in tattered Salvation Army hand-me-down jeans, flannel shirt, and broken-down shoes, this was a guy in need of a shower, a shave and a psychiatrist. Not necessarily in that order.

But it wasn't the old man's appearance or even his rantings that angered Vince. It was the fact that the only available parking spot on the block was right in front of him, which made it damn near impossible to avoid the nutjob.

With some difficulty, Vince maneuvered the Camaro between the bumpers of a mammoth SUV and a delivery van for an office supply company and considered himself lucky for setting off only one car alarm. As deafening beeps, honks and sirens filled the air, momentarily drowning out the Raggedy Man in mid-shriek, Vince stepped out and locked his door. He kept his head down, concentrating his gaze on his feet, as though doing so might cause annoyed passersby not to notice him as the cause of the aural barrage.

The Raggedy Man, though, spotted him right away. As Vince walked around the car to deposit a few quarters in the parking meter, the doomsayer circled around to intercept him. From the corner of his eye, Vince saw him coming. He dropped the last quarter into the

slot and quickly turned to hurry off in the opposite direction. He was running late enough for his appointment with Doyle Lipton as it was.

That was when the hand clutched his shoulder.

"Don't try to run from the truth, brother!" the Raggedy Man bellowed. "They might have placed a caul over your eyes, but there's still time to cast it off, to see them for what they really are!"

Vince sighed. This is what I get for hangin' too long with Speed, he thought morosely. Maybe next time he shouldn't help him finish a six-pack in the middle of the day when the possibility of work was calling.

"They may look normal to you and me, but don't let that fool you!" the Raggedy Man insisted, and tightened his grip. "Can't you see? Don't you have eyes in your head?"

"Take your damn hand off of me," Vince growled, but the Raggedy Man wasn't listening.

"There!" he shouted, using his sign to point across the street. "There's two of them now!"

Frowning, Vince turned to follow the direction the old loon's frantic gestures and felt his jaw drop open in surprise. On the opposite side of the avenue, standing at a busy taxi stand were a man and woman dressed in the same kind of black outfits as the couple who'd shown up at his door that very morning. No, they weren't Michael and Muriel. For one thing, the man was muscular, dark-skinned, and sporting a closely-cropped afro, while the woman was as pale a redhead as they came, with high cheekbones and a pair of major league breasts, but it was clear they were members of the same organization. Deeply engrossed in a conversation with one of the cab drivers, they seemed unaware of being the subjects of the Raggedy Man's tirade.

"They may look like missionaries," he said in a conspiratorial whisper to Vince, drawing him close, "but they're aliens! They're going to wipe us out!"

Vince laughed sharply and shook his head. "You're one crazy bastard, you know that?"

"We have to stop them!" the doomsayer insisted.

"How? Take away their Bibles? Sic a bunch'a Hare Krishnas on them for swipin' their corner?" Vince frowned. "They're not aliens, Grandpa."

"Don't be a fool. That's what they want you to believe!" The old man pointed to the sky. "They're the ones who knocked out our satellites so we can't see their ships approaching!" He screwed his eyes tightly shut and his body began to quiver. "Since the beginning of time they've been watching us," he intoned softly. His eyes shot open. "And now they're here!"

Dropping his sign, he lurched forward to grab Vince by the shoulders. "They're going to take us to their planet and turn us all into slaves!"

"You're nuts." Vince roughly pushed him back. "Now get outta my face. Go bother somebody else with that crazy talk."

The doomsayer stumbled away, pausing to retrieve his sign. "We're all lost!" he wailed. "God help us! God save us... from them!" He moved on down the street, still crying to the heavens for divine intervention. But there were no bolts of lightning to strike down the alleged monsters from outer space, no violent splitting of the earth to swallow them whole.

Vince was almost disappointed. It might've been fun to watch.

With a shrug, he glanced at his watch. "Oh, hell..." he mumbled. The run-in with the old man had added another five minutes to his already delayed arrival at the wood shop. Lipton was going to be a bear to deal with over this.

The Wood Shop was not the most imaginative name for a place of business devoted to the shaping of decorative lumber products, but then Doyle Lipton was not the most imaginative fellow. In his mid-thirties, his brown hair already thinning, Lipton had inherited the business from his late father, Phil, a stand-up kind of guy who understood what it was like to have to scramble to make a living. That didn't mean Doyle was unaware of the plights of the common man, but he didn't think helping to ease them was his responsibility.

It was exactly that lack of empathy that also meant he could be a royal pain when it came to dealing with folks coming to him for work. People skills were not one of his strengths.

Still, beggars can't be choosers, as Mom would say. So if he had to bow and scrape a little, maybe force himself to laugh every now and then at one of Lipton's lame-ass jokes, then Vince was willing to sacrifice his ego for the sake of a paycheck.

His shirt damp with sweat after the five-block jog from the car, Vince came to a shaky halt at the door to the shop. He bent over, hands resting on his knees, and paused to catch his breath. Back in high school, he reflected, he'd been able to run like that comic book character, the Flash; now, he was gasping like Aquaman stuck in the middle of the Sahara Desert. Well, it wasn't like Lea hadn't tried to get him to join her fitness club to lose a little weight, it was just that he was always too busy to do it. Too busy recovering from a hangover, usually.

When he was able to breathe like a normal person again, Vince straightened up, tucked in his shirt, swept back his hair, and opened the door. Instantly, his nostrils filled with the familiar, and welcome, scent of wood smoldering as it was turned through a motorized shaper. He smiled and rubbed his hands together; it was almost like coming home.

Charlie Maars gave him a brief wave as Vince walked through the shop. His right pinkie had healed nicely after that run-in with the molder's cutting blade last year, although it was now only half its normal size. The dangers of operating heavy machinery when you're on cold medicine, Vince thought; they put those warnings on the box for a reason. Of course, it wasn't like he was the most safety-minded guy in the world, either. He'd come close to losing a finger or two himself over the years.

He continued past the work area to the back of the shop, heading for Lipton's office. Through the window in the door, he could see Doyle sitting behind his steel desk. It was a real oddity, considering the profession in which he worked, but his feet were resting on one corner of it. A late lunch was spread out before him—sandwich, French es, pickles, coleslaw, bottle of soda—but he seemed to be

more interested in his reading material: the latest issue of *Lock and Load*, a magazine dedicated to the interests of gun enthusiasts. And if that wasn't enough evidence that Doyle Lipton was a fine, upstanding member of the National Rifle Association, one didn't have to look any further than the Remington 332 break action shotgun he kept on a rack behind the desk. A sign above the weapon warned "TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF THIS MUZZLE." Lipton, however, wasn't as tough as he liked people to think he was. The gun was only used for skeet shooting, not hunting.

Vince had accompanied Doyle a few times to the target range a mile outside of town, even though he didn't care much for guns, in the hope that buddying-up to him might lead to a job. Easier said than done, as it turned out. In order to be buddies, it is usually required that both parties have something in common; in their case, woodworking was pretty much it. Lipton didn't care much for basketball, NASCAR racing bored the crap out of him, football was too mindless. He thought Pamela Anderson looked too plastic, Catherine Zeta Jones was too thin and Jennifer Lopez was too heavy. He considered porn dull and repetitive, his musical tastes ran to Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra, and just listening to his dronelike voice for any extended period of time made you want to drive an ice pick into his brain.

And yet, for all the effort he put into those poor attempts at male bonding, for all the patience he exhibited, for all the moments he forced himself not to bash Lipton in the skull with one of the clay targets, what did Vince have to show for it? Nothing but some acquired skill for using a shotgun, something that would only ever come in handy if he felt like going on a shooting spree.

Well, who knew what tomorrow might bring?

He knocked on the door, then stepped inside the office. "Hey, Doyle," he said cheerily. "What's up?"

Lipton slowly lowered the magazine to glance over the top of the pages at his visitor. For some reason, he was wearing dark aviator sunglasses indoors. He probably thought doing so made him look cool, but the image was ruined by the scattering of whiteheads on his

forehead. Thirty-something years old and the man still suffered from acne. Lea used to say it probably had a lot to do with his questionable eating habits, of which the pile of greasy fries before him were a prime example.

"Oh," he said with some surprise. "Hello, Vince."

The smile that had sprang to Vince's face when he entered the shop immediately began to buckle. There was something wrong about Lipton's tone of voice, like he hadn't expected Vince to show up. "So, what did you need me for, Doyle?" he asked, determined to press ahead anyway.

Lipton seemed confused by the question. "Need...?"

No, Vince thought, this isn't good at all. "Yeah. The message you left? About the job you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Yeah, about that..." Doyle said slowly. "It seems I was a little premature in asking you to come in. There's no job." He went back to his afternoon reading.

"What do you mean there's no job?" Vince snapped. He reached over and pushed the magazine down to look him in the eye. "You told me just this morning there was work here!"

Lipton pulled the slick pages out of his hand. "And there was *supposed* to be, Vince; I wasn't jerking your chain. Calgary Builders had put in a major order just the other day for maple crown molding for the Rodgers Towers restoration they're handling on the south side of town. But right after I left that message for you, I got a call from Al Matadema, the head contractor on the job. Seems one of his guys accidentally cracked open a wall in the library with a pickaxe. And you know what they found inside that wall? A freakin' body, with a knife sticking out of its rib cage. Al said it looked like it'd been in there for years."

"So what happened to the order?" Vince asked.

"On hold indefinitely. I thought the cops might let them go back to work after they'd hauled the thing out of there." Lipton shrugged. "I was being optimistic."

"And what does the hell does you being optimistic do for me?"

"Well, I'm sorry about that," Lipton replied, although his tone sounded anything but apologetic. "I shouldn't have called you until

I'd made sure, but there you go. The cops sent the crew home, shut the whole place down, and sealed it up as a crime scene. Al doesn't have a clue as to when they'll be able to get back to it."

Vince felt the strength drain from his legs and just managed to flop into the guest chair next to the desk before his knees gave way. Another dead end; another failure. It was getting to be too much. "I... I really need this job, Doyle," he said quietly.

Lipton tore a huge chunk out of the sandwich. "And I wish I could help you, Vince, really, I do," he said around a mouthful of pepperoni and Swiss cheese. "But until Al tells me otherwise, I just don't have anything available at the moment."

"Well, thanks for dragging me all the way down here for nothing, Doyle," Vince muttered sarcastically. He reached across the desk and snagged one of the fries from the deli paper on which the lunch sat. He caught the hard stare Lipton flashed at him as he popped it in his mouth. "What, can't I have a lousy French fry?"

"I was saving that particular one for the end of my meal," Lipton said. A childish reaction, but one fairly in keeping with his inability to deal with folks on a sociable level. He wasn't even willing to share his meal. He waved a hand at Vince in a dismissive manner. "Aw, stop with the hang-dog look, Hansen. So I don't have work for you—it happens. May I remind you things are tough all over?"

Vince pointed at his plate. "Yeah, but you're the one with all the French fries."

"And they're good, too." Lipton picked up his magazine. "Now, do me a favor: let me finish my lunch in peace. I'll let you know if anything comes up, but don't wait by the phone." With a flourish, he snapped the magazine open and held it at eye-level to hide his face, clearly a sign the meeting was over.

For a few moments, Vince just sat there, grinding his teeth, clenching and unclenching his fists. He was unable to speak, unable to think clearly. All he wanted to do, right then and there, was grab that shotgun off the wall and put it to some good use.

And yet, he couldn't do it. Instead, he stood up, turned on his heel and stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind him as he went.

He took a small degree of pleasure from hearing the window crack.

Back out on the street, he kicked the crap out of a plastic trashcan and a stack of empty cardboard boxes until he'd worked off his rage. It didn't do the trick entirely, but he figured it was as much satisfaction as he was going to get, considering his level of frustration. Beating Lipton's head in would have been better, but you make do with what you have.

Screw it, he thought. There's gotta be somebody out there who needs a hand. Hell, at this point, I'd even sweep floors at Burger King... maybe.

Stuffing his hands in his pants pockets, he set off down the street. With a five-block walk back to the car, he hoped he wouldn't have anymore run-ins with the Raggedy Man. The way he felt right now, any idiot sorry enough to start spouting off about the end of the world was only asking to stand in for Doyle Lipton as a punching bag.

But it wasn't a bedraggled old man who fell into step beside him just one block later. It was Michael and Muriel.

"Hello, Vince," she said pleasantly. "Do you mind if we walk with you?"

Vince sighed. "It's a free country."

They walked in silence for a little while, Vince stealing the occasional glance at the woman's chest and legs. She sure was put together nicely. He looked up to find her watching him. She had a nice smile, too.

"You two decide to try a different neighborhood for your recruitment drive," he asked, "or did you come clear across town just to take another shot at me? See if I'd be more receptive to being 'chosen' after I had my morning coffee."

"Which would you prefer?" she asked mischievously. The smile widened. "Actually, it's a little of both. Michael and I were meeting with Sister Claire and Brother Matthew, two other members of our congregation. You may have seen them in the area—"

"You mean the redhead and the big black dude?" Vince interrupted.

Muriel nodded. "Yes. They mentioned noticing you when they were at the taxi stand. You seemed to be engaged in conversation with a street person—"

"Whack-job," he countered.

She paused, then shrugged. "If that is how you prefer to label an unfortunate soul." There was that sharp ring of disappointment in her voice again, the same tone she'd used when he'd chased them off his porch this morning.

"What, the Raggedy Man's not one of the Chosen?" Vince asked sarcastically. "I thought the door was open to everybody. Or is it just the ones who can afford VCRS and DVD players?"

"Not everyone is willing to listen to our message, Vince," Michael chimed in, "and not everyone can be counted among the fortunate."

Vince smiled. "Many are called, but few are Chosen,' huh?"

Michael frowned; apparently, he didn't like it when someone used Scripture for sarcastic commentary. "In the end, though, all will stand in judgment before the Lord. And all Muriel and I—and the rest of our brothers and sisters—can do is save as many as possible in the time that remains."

Vince's right eyebrow crept up and he stopped walking; his companions did likewise. "The time that remains before what?" Michael opened his mouth to answer, but Vince cut him off. "Don't tell me. Judgment Day, right?" He laughed sharply. "Y'know, I like the space invaders angle the old man was mouthing off about instead. At least it's different." He flashed a sarcastic grin. "This the point where you start quoting from *Revelations* to put the fear of God in me, get me to see the error of my ways, just before you ask for a donation?"

"We're not interested in your money, Vince," Michael said crossly.

"Uh-huh. Sure." Vince glanced at Muriel. "You don't want my money." He folded his arms across his chest and pondered the issue for a moment; then a knowing smile lit his features. "Oh, I get it. You folks are looking to save my soul, right?"

"Yours and many others," she replied solemnly.

Vince stared at her. There was nothing about her expression to indicate she was yanking his chain; in fact, she looked deadly earnest. "And how do you plan on doing that? By nagging me until I give in? Or do you just shove me in the back of a van and take me to wherever it is you people..." He smiled slyly. "Gather your flock?"

She looked surprised by what he was implying. "We would never resort to violence, Vince, not even if it were in your best interests." She shook her head. "It's not our way."

Vince snorted derisively. "Well, you see, right there's the problem: I don't know what your 'ways' *are*. Who the hell are you people? I never saw any of you banging on doors in my neighborhood. before this morning. What's this 'Chosen' crap you keep handing out to just about everybody you run into? And just what is it that makes *me* so damn special?"

"Everyone is special to the Lord, Vince," Michael replied. "Didn't you watch the DVD?"

"Yeah," Vince said slowly.

Michael nodded, apparently pleased by the answer. "Then you know why you've been Chosen. We're here to offer you a second chance."

"A second chance to do what?" he asked sharply.

"To better your life," Muriel replied. "Haven't you always wanted to put all your past mistakes behind you, to start your life fresh? To reach your potential, achieve the sort of goals you once set for yourself early in life, perhaps even find a way to reconcile with Lea?"

Despite his suspicions, Vince found himself slowly nodding in agreement. It was all true, what she said. He did have thoughts like that, especially on days like this one, when it seemed people kept stepping on his neck every time he tried to raise his head out of the gutter he'd fallen into.

Yet, when he looked into her eyes, he only saw pity reflected in them—for the poor choices he'd made, for the life he lived, for the man he'd become—and it filled him with rage. Who was she to offer him second chances? What made her any better than him?

"No one is better than anyone else, Vince," she said. "All of us are equal in the eyes of the Lord."

Vince blinked. Did she just read his mind? Maybe the Raggedy Man had a point about that whole alien thing. Or maybe she was just good at reading body language: the "you're full of crap" look he was giving her was pretty easy to pick up on.

He laughed. "Y'know, it's always easy for the other guy to say something like that when he or she has got everything they need. It's the rest of us poor bastards that have to fight to survive."

"But why fight at all?" Michael asked. "We're offering you the opportunity to end that struggle, to be among people like yourself—"

"You mean other losers," Vince stated flatly.

Michael frowned. "I didn't say that."

"No, you didn't," Vince agreed, "but I'm beginning to get the picture."

"And that would be?"

"You're scam artists. You go door-to-door, telling people they're 'chosen'—exactly for what you're not real clear about—and that you're just trying to save their souls from eternal damnation. Then you hand out the brochures or the tapes or the DVDs to show how much you know about them, like God provided the background checks on them for you to prove you're working for Him." He nodded. Yeah, it sounded right to him. The fact that Michael was starting to look angry at the accusation, and Muriel again was showing her disappointment, only encouraged him to continue. "But it's not everything, is it? You don't hit folks with the deep, dark secrets they're hiding, the skeletons they keep in the back of the closet. You only roll out the kind of stuff you can pick up in public records, smalltime things anybody could look up before they start ringing doorbells." He shrugged. "I don't know, maybe you've got contacts in law enforcement and that's how you found out about my rap sheet. And the breakup with Lea? You could've had people in the bar when we went at it. It sure as hell wasn't a private argument."

Vince paused, waiting for a response. From their silence, he was sure he'd nailed their asses to the wall, blown their whole operation wide open. If they were smart, they'd head for the hills before he dropped a dime on the both of them and had the cops swarming down on their group like that plague of locusts Moses called down in

the Bible. If they weren't, well, Michael would probably find out a whole different meaning to being "chosen" while he was doing a stretch in prison.

Much to his surprise, however, the anger slowly drained from Mr GQ's face, and the sneer he was wearing reconfigured into a broad smile. "The Lord has certainly gifted you with quite an imagination, Vince," he said with a wag of his index finger.

Now it was Vince's turn to turn red. "Screw you," he spat. He was about to put to good use the fist he just realized was hanging from the end of his arm, when Muriel gently placed a hand on his shoulder. It was weird, one touch from her and the rage seemed to drain right out of him. He couldn't tell why it happened so quickly. Just two seconds ago, he was ready to beat the crap out of both of them but for some reason, he didn't mind. Maybe it was because it was something Lea always used to do when he started to lose his temper and the memory of that instantly cooled him off. Maybe it was because he suddenly realized how stupid he was about to act and that the only one who'd get hauled off by the cops would've been him. Or maybe the girl used those mental powers of hers to get inside his head again, like when she'd seemed to read his mind, and flick off the anger switch.

"And just what are we supposed to be doing with this information, Vince?" she asked quietly. "If what you say were true, we must have had an ulterior motive for approaching so many people, correct? So what might that be?"

He rounded on her, ready to give her an earful, too, and then paused. When it came to motive, he had to admit he hadn't thought it out before opening his mouth; he figured they'd be so scared by his accusations they'd run off before the conversation got that far. But now that they were standing right in front of him, waiting for an answer, the best he could come up with was a noncommittal shrug. "How the hell should I know?" he said tersely. "Could be you work it so that while one of you is in the living room, telling some poor old sinner how much God loves them, the other's upstairs in the bedroom, swiping the cash and jewelry. You hear about stuff like that all the time on TV, with fake gas meter readers and building

inspectors and exterminators. Your group just works a different angle."

"And if we're not interested in money or possessions, as Michael already told you?"

Vince gestured toward her clothing, and the large leather bag she was carrying, one containing a variety of pamphlets, videotapes and DVD cases. "Okay, let's say for the sake of argument you're not a bunch of thieves lookin' to rip off old ladies. Maybe you're part of some weird-ass cult lookin' for new recruits and who better to sign up than people you figure have nothing left to lose? That's what being 'chosen' is all about, right? God sent you to round up all the losers," he rolled his eyes humorlessly, "I mean the 'special' folks like me so we can live in peace and harmony on some compound in the middle of nowhere and wait for the spaceship that's gonna take us to the Promised Land." He folded his arms across his chest and glared at her. "That one sound better than the scam angle?"

Muriel sighed and lowered her head, clearly exasperated. Michael chuckled.

Vince sneered at him. "You think that's funny?"

Michael wiped a tear from the corner of his right eye. "A little. And not so far off from the wild theory we heard this morning from your friend, Mr Moorcock."

Vince's eyes narrowed. "You keeping an eye on him, too?"

"No," Muriel replied. "We saw the two of you sitting on his porch as we made our rounds."

"Oh." Vince nodded, remembering how the bottles of *cerveza* had spurred them to launch into off-key song as they watched the handsome couple make their way through the block. Vince had been surprised that Speed—a guy so convinced that, if there really was a God, He obviously didn't give a damn about all the suffering and evil going on in the world—knew so many religious tunes. One of those little secrets people always had a habit of leaking out at the strangest times, he guessed.

"You know, you're quite, well, loud when you're inebriated," Muriel added.

Vince smiled. "You should try it sometime. Might help you loosen up." He wagged a finger at her. "I bet you were a real wild woman back in the day, before you met Jesus, that is."

She blushed for a moment, then looked at him sternly. "Don't mock what you don't understand, Mr Hansen. 'Be not ignorant of any thing in a great matter or a small.'"

He tilted his head to one side, trying to figure out the source of her quote. "You pull that out of the Gospel of St Mark or something?"

"The Apocrypha," she replied smartly. "The books of Greek Scripture. You should try reading something other than pornography and newspaper comic strips once in awhile."

"Ouch," he said, grinning. "Lost that sunny disposition, huh, Sister Muriel?" Although he wouldn't cop to it, he was taking pleasure at watching how flustered she'd gotten by his remark. He'd struck a nerve, all right, so maybe what she'd said before was true: nobody really *was* better than anyone else.

Michael stepped around him to place a comforting hand on Muriel's shoulder. "That was uncalled for, Vince," he said sharply. "Muriel and I are only here to help you."

"Well, who the hell says I want your help?" Vince snapped. "What gives you the right to show up at my door, uninvited, and start tellin' me how you're gonna make my life better, huh?"

And just like that, he shut up. Saying it out loud, he suddenly realized how stupid it sounded, refusing the help of someone apparently willing to give it with no strings attached. None that he could readily see, at least.

Was he so much of a loser, he wondered, that he'd even blow off a chance to maybe turn his life around...?

Michael didn't give him the opportunity to voice that question. "You're right, Vince," he replied with a hint of bitterness to his voice. "Who are *we* to think you need our help? You've lived such a fulfilling life all these years, haven't you?"

"Go to hell," Vince said, glowering.

"No one had to tell you what paths to choose, what decisions to make," Michael continued. "You never had to ask anyone for assistance, unless, of course, you needed to borrow some money

from your brother. Or Speed. Or Lea." He smiled, but there was no warmth to be found in it this time. "By the way, how *did* that job interview with Doyle Lipton go this afternoon? When did he say you should start?"

It was right there in the tone of his voice: he knew exactly what had gone on at the Wood Shop. But how could that be, unless...

"You had something to do with me losing that job?" Vince snarled.

"No, Vince," Muriel replied, looking like she'd regained her composure. She turned to her companion. "Please, Michael, there's no reason to argue. Vince is a proud man, and proud men are usually the last to ask for help from anyone." Her eyes narrowed as she stared hard at him. "Wouldn't you agree?"

Michael sheepishly hung his head and nodded silently.

She turned back to Vince. "You might not believe it to hear him now, but Michael once had quite a lot in common with you." She smiled warmly. "He came around eventually."

"Not giving up on me, huh?" he asked with a frown.

Muriel shook her head, a haunted look suddenly darkening her eyes. "Not while there's still time." She quickly looked to Michael. "We should go now. Our work is far from over, and there are others we need to see before the night is done."

Michael nodded in agreement, then glanced at Vince. "See you around, Mr Hansen." Muriel looped her arm around his, and together they moved on down the street.

"Great," Vince muttered sarcastically as he watched them go. He'd been hoping that, if they weren't going to come off their pulpits and admit they were crooks, they would've at least agreed to leave him the hell alone after the argument they'd just had. From Michael's reactions, it was clear he thought Vince was no longer worth their efforts. But as long as "Sister Muriel" was going to act as peacemaker, it was unlikely they'd be giving up so easily.

Vince sighed. Trapped between unemployment and religious freaks. What made him suddenly deserving of having so much crap dumped on him in less than twenty-four hours? You'd think God was out to get him, and honestly, it wouldn't surprise him to find out it was true. He just wished somebody could tell him why.

With a despondent shake of his head, he set off in search of his car.
And a drink.

Yeah. He really could use a drink right about now.

FIVE

As a little girl, Lea Preston had expected the world to give her the best of everything it had to offer: toys, candy, clothing, friends. As an adult, she came to learn that the world really didn't give a damn about what Lea Preston wanted.

Try as she might, she couldn't put a finger on the exact moment her life seemed to take its downward spiral, but she knew she was a helluva long way from getting it to level off. It couldn't have happened during childhood: sure, she'd been the typically gawky, somewhat plain-looking girl who stood out in a crowd, even back home in Tulane, Nebraska, the kind who'd had to endure the whole braces-and-glasses hell lots of kids go through at some point, but it hadn't been a bad life. There'd been no abusive parents to fear, no destructive sibling rivalry to contend with (being an only child and all), no traumatic moments to forever scar her psyche. In fact, her growing years had been just the opposite, filled with tea parties and dress-up, first kisses and playing doctor, puppies and first boyfriends and skinned knees and birthday parties with Baskin-Robbins ice cream cakes. There were awkward moments, too, of course, when she felt she'd rather die than ever show her face in public again. Like when she was six and Billy Connor scared her so bad by throwing a dead chipmunk at her that she wet her pants. But they weren't the kind of experiences she ever considered so horrific they could darken her adult life.

Her teen years had been a fairly happy rite of passage, once she stumbled through puberty and the Good Lord had seen fit to grace her with a clear complexion and a pair of breasts guaranteed to get the attention of every male hottie in high school. The ugly duckling had at last become a swan, casting aside braces for a stunning smile, glasses for contact lenses, and enjoying every moment she got to spend showing off her bright plumage to every creature in the lake, with a few exceptions. Not surprisingly, those same stellar features caused her any number of problems, from jealous girlfriends who thought she was out to steal their men to jocks who forced

themselves on her, thinking that because she had big tits she was easy *and* stupid. One side wanted to beat her head in with a brick, the other tried to force open her legs to run some pipe. But those were unfortunate incidents. There might have been a few more of them than she cared to remember. But were they the reason she fell into the abyss? Hardly. In fact, some of her biggest detractors back then turned into close friends later on, even a few of the guys.

College? Oh, sure, there'd been the occasional professor offering a higher grade point average if she was willing to engage in some extracurricular activities, usually involving intensive study sessions in their bedrooms. After high school, she'd almost come to expect that kind of behavior from other students, but she'd hoped the male teachers at the Ignatius College of Art and Design would have shown a bit more restraint and a helluva lot more maturity. Still, she managed to get through those years with little trouble, and had the Bachelor's degree to prove she had the talent to move ahead with attaining her dreams of becoming a Fine Artist.

Maybe that was when the descent started, when she wasn't able to make a go of it as an artist. Two years out of school, working odd waitressing jobs here and there to support herself while she struggled with her first painting, and the muse had apparently deserted her. After eight hours of drudgery, taking orders and carrying trays and having guys pinch her ass and call her "sweetie," she'd wearily stumble home to stare at a blank canvas, waiting for a spark of inspiration that never came. Then exhaustion would overtake her and she'd wake up the next morning to start the process all over again, not even having cracked open her set of oils before turning in for the night. And so it had continued, ad nauseum, for the past six years, the paints long dried up, the canvas making an unscheduled nocturnal flight four years ago when she flung it out her apartment window in frustration.

Yeah, she reflected, that sounded about right. Now that she focused on the matter, her artistic failures did seem the likeliest starting point for her fall from grace: dreams unfulfilled, spirit dampened, bouts of crushing depression, yadda yadda yadda, the whole nine yards. There were still times it even hurt to look at a

sunset, the beauty of the warm golds and deep reds, majestic blues and burnt oranges forcing her to tears. That was the reason she took to working late, so she wouldn't have to be reminded of the incredible palette God got to make use of every evening. Black had become her color of choice—in clothing, oftentimes in mood—broken only by the reddish flames of her hair as they licked and curled around her shoulders.

But that was just the tip of the iceberg, as the saying went. Being unable to pull her thoughts together long enough to create one lousy painting might have pushed her to the edge, but that should have been only a minor setback. And that was true, but it had started her on her way. Yet, there was far more to it than hating the muse, no doubt, because she'd never been that shallow in all her twenty-nine years; she was a complicated woman, with complicated issues. So complicated, sometimes, that not even she understood the true depths of her own troubles. The very same troubles that had led her, over time, to her current place of employment.

The Terminal Bar was the perfect name for a shelter, a haven, for the downbeat, the disaffected, the bottom-feeding members of society. She'd walked through the door more than year ago, looking only to use the phone after her car broke down, maybe have a drink while she waited for AAA to tow it to the nearest repair shop, but she'd just never seemed to leave. It was the dreary, somber tone of the place that first attracted her, that and the "HELP WANTED" sign stuck haphazardly in a corner of one of the windows. The pay wasn't all that great, the clientele was a cast of barflies straight out of a Charles Bukowski novel, and she was certain she'd eventually get lung cancer from the secondhand smoke she was breathing in all the time, but there was a sense of security here, a sense of family, as bizarre as it sounded even to her. She was accepted here, black moods and all, and had even come to consider some of the less bothersome regulars (i.e., the few guys who didn't constantly pinch her ass as she went by or talk to her boobs while placing an order) as some kind of distantly related uncles and cousins. The crazy ones usually left out of family reunions because they tended to do things that embarrassed everyone.

Even the owner wasn't such a bad guy once you got to know him, although few people ever got close enough to find that out. Gordon "Gordo" Stewart was a bear of a man, with the body hair of a grizzly and when he was pissed off enough, the temperament of one to match. He wore his hair buzz-cut style, a throwback to his Marine days, but if his arms and chest had ever felt the touch of a razor, it must've been decades ago. Gray-and-brown strands covered him like untamed foliage. And although a paunch was starting to form—Gordo was kinda partial to the fried onion rings and quarter-pound burgers Lea turned out in the kitchen at the rear of the bar—the rest of him was solid muscle. To which anyone dumb enough to try to pick a fight with an ex-Marine could attest.

Actually, that was wrong; not an *ex-Marine*. As Gordo once explained to her, he and his brothers in the Corps had an expression: "Once a Marine, always a Marine." *Semper Fi*: Do Or Die, baby. And for a guy in his mid-fifties, with rock-hard fists the size of hams and a solid, lantern jaw that could probably break down a door, Master Sergeant Gordon Stewart was still all Marine. "And all man, too," he'd said with a wink.

She'd thought about finding out if that last part was true, after she'd been working there a few months, but decided against it. For all she knew, Gordo could have turned out to be as hard on his women as he was with an unruly drunk. Besides, she'd already suffered through one relationship like that, just after college; the possibility of getting slapped around again just didn't hold much appeal for her.

And then she met Vince Hansen. He was different from most of the guys she'd dated. For one thing, he seemed even worse off than her, if such a thing was possible. For another, he was the first person who ever made her want to turn her life around. If only so she wouldn't end up like him.

They'd crossed paths a year and a half ago, when he and his buddy, Speed Moorcock, were on a bar crawl. Vince was the more sober of the two, although not by much, explaining that he was the

"designated driver" since Speed was in no condition to be handling a wheelchair. She'd laughed at his joke and found herself attracted by his boyish good looks, his slight overbite, the wild, spiky style of his blond hair. Sure, he'd kept stealing glances at her boobs while he talked, but he'd kept his eyes focused on her face whenever she had something to say. That alone put him on a level above most of the patrons.

The attraction, as Rod Stewart once sang, was purely physical, at least in the beginning: he was looking to get laid, while she was bordering on another bout of depression and desperate for companionship. They met somewhere in the middle and wound up breaking the springs of his living room couch. She moved in with him two weeks later, although she kept her apartment. Why be left out on the street if the relationship ever soured, she'd thought. Good thing she'd had that kind of foresight.

It seemed odd that he was never able to hold a steady job, but she was too much in love to press the issue, and Vince always kept assuring her the employment drought couldn't last much longer. She knew he was a skilled woodworker—the decorative trimming in the bathroom and kitchen were evidence of his craftsmanship—but he never showed any determination to put his talents to any real use, moving from one job to the next without seeming to care. Carpenter to landscaper, auto mechanic to delivery man, plumber to bug exterminator. The range of abilities he showed was admirable, but not when they were all brought to bear during the course of a single year.

Not that she was any better, in her own way. Finding a stable relationship, or what appeared to be one in comparison to all the other false starts she'd ever experienced, might have lifted her spirits, but did nothing to stimulate her artistically. The muse had never come back from her extended vacation, and Lea, apparently, had never gotten the notification. There were no sketches of her man in repose, at play, or at work, no color roughs or paintings that reflected her love for him, not even a doodle on a message pad. But that was all right, she'd assured herself. That part of her life might

have been shelved for good, but as long as she had a decent job and Vince Hansen in her life, she'd be just fine.

She should have known, as soon as she'd convinced herself of that fairly sizable white lie, that it'd all end up in tears.

The early warning signs had been too subtle, too commonplace to notice right away; had she been paying more attention, Lea often reflected these days, she might not have been so surprised when things fell apart. Sure, money had been tight on a few occasions, and Vince's mood swings often rivaled her own in their dark intensity, but it wasn't until they were closing in on their first anniversary together that she started to get the sense that all was not right in the kingdom. She'd come back to the house after helping Gordo close up for the night to find Vince sitting on the couch, watching a movie and drinking beer. Not an unusual position for him to be in, but considering it was five o'clock on a Monday morning and he had to be at work (delivering construction supplies that month) in a few hours, it was a bit disconcerting, to say the least. Vince had mumbled something about being unable to sleep, but she'd been too tired to focus on his somber mood, so with a quick peck to his forehead, she'd bid him goodnight and tumbled into bed.

When she found him pretty much in the same position seven hours later, she started to wonder what might be going on. She let it go, however. The bloom was still on the rose, as her mother would have said, and she didn't want to ruin what she still considered a good thing by asking too many questions.

And yet, when the cycle repeated itself every morning for the rest of the week, she couldn't help but say, "Vince, is everything okay?"

He looked at her over the cylindrical Corona bottle as he took a swig, a suspicious look darkening his eyes. He swallowed and said, "Why?"

She hesitated a moment, reluctant to have this lead into a potential argument, which would be their first. The first of many, as it turned out. But she plunged ahead anyway. "Well... I mean, you've been sitting here like this every time I come home after work, and... and I was just wondering if everything was okay. You know, with work and stuff."

There'd been an accusatory glare in his eyes as he started fiddling with the label on the bottle, peeling it off in small strips and letting the pieces flutter to the carpet. Inwardly, Lea flinched, waiting for him to tell her she'd done something wrong. He wouldn't have been the first boyfriend to blame her for the sudden decline of their relationship.

Instead, Vince just gruffly answered, "Everything's fine." Then he took another long pull from the bottle.

But that hadn't been a good enough response for her. If something was going on that was causing him such pain—and it was obvious he was in pain, Vince never having been that good a liar—then she wanted to help. She sat down next to him on the couch and reached out to stroke his face, then gasped when he pulled away at her touch.

"Vince—" she began.

"I said everything's fine!" he snapped, and stood up. "So I'm sittin' around when you come in in the morning, so what? I told you already I was havin' trouble sleeping!"

"Well, if you can't sleep, then something must be troubling you, right?" It sounded like a sensible question to ask, but his only answer had been to turn his back to her. "Vince, honey, don't be mad," she said soothingly, trying to calm him. "It's just that I'm worried about you."

He wheeled around and pointed the bottle's neck at her. "You think I lost another job, right? Right?"

"I..." Her voice trailed off. It was true. She hadn't wanted to come right out and say it, but yes, that had been her first thought. How could it not be, given his track record? And now that he'd voiced her concern, now that it was in the open—"Yes," she said quietly, unable to look him in the eye.

He grunted. "Well, ain't you Nancy friggin' Drew?" he said with a sneer. "Smarter'n your idiot boyfriend who can't even hold a stinkin' job, right?"

She shook her head. "I don't think you're an idiot, Vince."

"Just a total screw-up, huh?"

"I've never said that, either. Would it make you feel better if I did?" Now it was her turn to start losing her cool. She didn't like people

who tried to put words in her mouth, and boyfriend or no, he wasn't going to get away with it. "Be pissed off at yourself all you want to, Vince, but if you really lost your job, don't even think about pointing the finger at me. I've been nothing but supportive of you, good times and bad, but if you want to ruin what we've got together by making me the fall guy for your problems, then maybe you are an idiot."

Her lips drew tight as she glared challengingly at him, waiting for the barrage of verbal abuse sure to come. Instead, much to her surprise, he fell silent, arms dropping loosely to his sides, gaze focused on a spot on the floor.

"Yeah, maybe I am," he said hoarsely. He drew a deep breath, slowly released it. Sheepishly, he looked at her. "No 'maybes' about it, huh?"

She frowned. "That all depends on the next words out of your mouth."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry." He rapped his head lightly with the bottle. "I can be a real dope sometimes, y'know?"

She let the comment pass. Why restoke the fire once it's gone out? Besides, she'd never been the sort of vindictive person who enjoyed reminding others of their considerable faults.

With a sharp exhale, Vince flopped back down beside her and slid an arm around her shoulders to pull her close. She allowed it. He flashed a smile probably meant to look witty, but it only came out looking embarrassed. "Our first fight, huh?"

"Hopefully our last." She gently tousled his hair with one hand; he wisely took and kissed the other.

And that was that, fight over. But there were more to follow, especially when he began borrowing money and failing to repay her. The early loans she was eventually willing to overlook, either because they were given out of her misplaced love for him, or because she knew she'd just never see the cash come back. Live and learn, as Mom would say. But when he passed the thousand-dollar mark, closer to two thousand, actually, she told him the bank was closed. That was the point where he started borrowing from his brother.

When she looked back on the past eighteen months, Lea had to admit the time could have been better spent. She still felt something for Vince, still worried about him, still cared for him on some level, but the painfully blind devotion she'd once shown had eased to a dull ache. Now all she had left was the familiar world of bipolar disorder, ass pinches and secondhand smoke. Oh, and a bank account a couple thousand bucks lighter than it should be.

And all because she'd made the mistake of letting Vince Hansen into her life.

No, that was wrong. She couldn't blame him for everything; they had had some good times together. He was an ass at times—an incredibly self-centered, boorish, insulting ass who always had a habit of saying the wrong thing at the wrong moment and being completely oblivious to it. But not even she could pin her troubles on him, even when he was stupid enough to suggest she take up stripping as an occupation. In his limited view of the world, a girl who looked like her shouldn't have to think twice about making a living by putting her physical assets to good use. And what better way to do it than displaying them for "entertainment" purposes at a "gentlemen's" club like the Pelican Briefs, down in the red light district? As he'd said on more than one occasion when they were discussing possible career changes for her, as long as there were roomfuls of drunken morons willing to stuff dollar bills in her panties, there was money to be made. And money was money, right? How you earned it didn't matter, as long as it kept coming in, even if that meant publicly humiliating yourself to get it. He didn't see it that way, of course, but then he wasn't the one who'd be parading around in nothing but a pink boa and five-inch heels.

He'd be the one throwing the dollar bills.

Nope, she thought glumly, she only had herself to blame; Vince had just been one more poor choice in a seemingly endless line of bad relationships she'd constantly found herself in, dating all the way back to Charlie O'Neill in fifth grade. Well, at least she'd made the right choice this time by ignoring Vince's so-called "advice." Maybe if

her luck held out, she could continue to ignore him. Like for the rest of her life.

The minute he walked through the door of the Terminal Bar, Vince had a bad feeling about showing up unannounced at Lea's job. Deep inside, he knew he shouldn't be doing it, especially when he took into consideration that the last time he'd done this, the night they'd had their big blow-up right in the middle of Happy Hour, Gordo had tossed him out on his ass, none too gently, and told him never to come back. And that was just last week. Vince shook his head. Wherever did the time go?

He stood just inside the doorway, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the extremely dim lighting, waiting to see if Gordo was going to come charging across the room to beat his head in. The beefy barman was too busy to notice his arrival, however, his attention focused instead on the eighteen-inch television bolted high on the wall behind the counter. He was watching some news report while he polished glasses.

Vince scanned the room, looking for his girlfriend—*ex-girlfriend*, he had to remind himself—but didn't see her. She was probably in the kitchen, working up somebody's order, so he decided to wait. Steeling up his nerve, he weaved his way around empty tables, working his way toward the bar. On his journey, he passed the smoke-dingy jukebox that sat next to an old-fashioned payphone kiosk near the entrance to the bathrooms. A top forty hit from the bad old days of the eighties rattled from the Wurlitzer's speakers: the Little River Band warbling about the "Lonesome Loser." Vince sneered; he'd come to really hate that song over the years.

The song was soon overpowered by the louder volume of the television as he drew closer to the bar, and Vince realized with some surprise that it was Graham Miller who was giving the report. Geez, he thought, it must be a really important story for him to be on before six o'clock.

"The war of words continues to escalate between the superpowers, as leaders on all sides blame each other for the mysterious failure of the global satellite network." The image changed to footage of the United Nations general assembly. A heavyset, middle-aged man with a brush-cut hairstyle and a thick mustache stood behind a podium in the massive room, nervously mopping sweat off his brow with a damp handkerchief. "At this morning's emergency session of the United Nations, US Special Scientific Envoy Richard Schaefer addressed the member nations about the mounting crisis."

"I assure the assembly," Schaefer said with a measure of exasperation in his voice, "that the President is as mystified and concerned by recent events as the rest of us. My staff and I are still in the process of examining the data we've gathered, but until we've had time to sift through it all..." He paused to swab his forehead again. "To make assumptions at this juncture about the cause of the problem would be highly imprudent."

Miller returned to the screen, gazing intently into the camera. "The President will be addressing the nation at eight o'clock Eastern Time tonight to call for calm in the face of this growing crisis." He glanced at his notes, then looked back to the camera as a map of North Korea appeared inside a graphics box to one side of his head. "In a related item, North Korean President Kim Jung Il has accused the United States of being the source of the communications blackout, claiming the White House authorized it in a blatant first step to implement its plans to invade the country and depose him. Early this afternoon, North Korea officially closed its borders and shut down phone lines to prevent any possible news leaks regarding its government's next steps, although rumors have been strong that Kim is threatening to make use of his country's limited nuclear arsenal should the United States or its allies move on him."

"Hey, turn that crap off, wouldja?" Vince asked. "I'm depressed enough already."

The bartender reached for the remote control, then stopped. Slowly, he turned around to face him. "What the hell are you doing here?" he growled.

"Nice to see you, too, Gordo." Vince eased on to one of the barstools. "I'll have a vodka and tonic; hold the tonic."

"Have it someplace else," Gordo said. "You forget? You been barred from here, jerkwad."

Vince nodded and scooped up a handful of peanuts. "Uh-huh. Lea around?"

Gordo grunted. "You're a regular glutton for punishment, you know that?"

Vince smiled slyly. "I'm a romantic, is what I am." He popped a few nuts into his mouth and munched noisily.

"Romantic, my ass," Gordo replied as he poured the drink. He set it on the bar in front of Vince. "Stupid is a better word. What, didn't you get the memo? Lea's moved on, Hansen."

"To who?" Vince asked with a snarl. "You?"

Gordo's expression darkened, and he leaned menacingly over the bar, putting his face inches from Vince's. "I'm givin' you one chance to get the hell outta my place, smartass, under your own power or mine. Which is it?"

Lea knew something bad was going to happen the moment she walked out of the kitchen. The first indication was that, stubbornly block-headed as ever, Vince had decided to drag his sorry ass into the Terminal, in spite of Gordo's warnings, most likely for another sad attempt at reconciling. The second was that Gordo was right up in Vince's face and getting ready to pound him.

"Ah, shit," she moaned sarcastically. "Just when I thought it was gonna be a nice day..."

That broke the tension. Both men looked at her, then each other. Slowly, Gordo relaxed, then slid back behind the counter.

"Can you give us a minute?" she asked him.

Gordo nodded, shot a heated glance at Vince, then turned back to her. "Lemme know if you need any help."

"You'll be the first one I call," she said pleasantly. As soon as he'd moved back to the far end of the bar, where he began drying glasses

with a dingy white towel, Lea wheeled around to face Vince. Her eyes narrowed. "I'm not loaning you any money."

Vince frowned. "That's good, 'cause I'm not here to borrow any."

She grunted. "So why the sudden need to visit, as if I didn't know."

His hard expression softened. "It's awful lonely out there without you."

Lea laughed sharply. "Try getting a job. You won't be so lonely."

He snarled wordlessly, and snatched at the glass in front of him. He took a few hard swallows before setting it down. "I'm trying," he muttered sullenly. "Don't you think I've been trying?"

She placed her hands on her hips and gazed at him sternly. "I'm sure you have. But that doesn't give you the right to come in here and start bothering me at *my* job."

Vince took another sip of his drink, fortifying himself for the battle ahead, no doubt. "Why?" he asked sharply, and nodded his head in the direction of Gordo. "Hulk Hogan over there gonna beat me up just 'cause I came to see my girl?"

Lea ground her teeth for a moment, feeling her cheeks flush with rage. "I'm not your 'girl' anymore, remember?" she snarled.

He slammed the glass down, and Lea couldn't help but jump. It was like a gun had gone off.

"Yeah, I remember," Vince said a little louder. "What I don't understand is how you're able to go on with your life like I never existed."

Lea exhaled slowly and shook her head. "You just don't get it, do you?"

Vince smiled, but there was no real warmth in the wide display of teeth and gums. "Guess I'm not as smart as you are."

Her lips curled in disgust. Same crap, different day: two minutes with him and they were right back to sniping at one another. "No argument there," she said tersely. "I want to make something of my life, Vince, not waste it like you, hanging out and watching TV all night, or hanging out and partying with Speed, or hanging out drinking somewhere and waking up the next morning to find out I've lost the latest opportunity to better myself. It's time to grow up." She folded her arms across her chest. "Any of that ring a bell?"

"Yeah, yeah, lots of bells," he replied. "So you wanna be somebody—great. I'm all for it. But what's that got to do with us?"

"Everything."

He came off the stool and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Come on, Lea, you don't mean that."

From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Gordo. He'd put down his towel and was walking around the end of the bar. He moved slowly, apparently so Vince wouldn't notice.

"Gordo..." she said in a warning tone. "I'm handling this."

Vince turned, and looked surprised to find the muscular leatherneck just a few feet away and without the protective space of a counter between them. He smiled at Lea. "See? You do still care about me. If you didn't, you would've let Sergeant Slaughter kick my ass."

"I just didn't want you getting hurt." It was true, but he obviously saw more to her actions than a simple plea to prevent a violent confrontation he was sure to lose. It was kind of sad in its way: his desire was so strong to convince himself she'd be willing to come back that he was grasping at straws, but it was pure Vince Hansen. He only heard what he wanted to hear.

She took a step back, pulling away from his touch, and with a heavy heart watched the shadow of doe-eyed confusion that swept across his face.

"Lea?" he said quietly.

She glanced down, suddenly afraid to say more, reluctant to utter the one thing sure to hurt him worse than any physical pain she could deliver, but then she realized she'd only be hurting herself if she didn't. She looked him in the eye. "It's over, Vince."

"But..." His jaw moved silently for a few seconds, as the words he so obviously wanted to say seemed to desert him. All that came out was a hoarse, "But, baby, I love you."

"And I love you. But it's just not enough anymore."

He shook his head, unwilling to accept it. "You don't mean that."

"I do," she insisted. "You're not listening, Vince. That's why you never get the message."

He reached out to try to grab her; she stepped back again. "Lea, you've gotta give me another chance. Just let me explain..."

And suddenly Gordo was standing between them. "There's nothing to explain, man."

"Stay out of this, jarhead," Vince snapped. "It's got nothing to do with you."

Gordo's lips pulled back in a feral snarl. "You're harassing my employee, jackass. That makes it everything to do with me." He turned to Lea and shrugged. "You know, you're right? He never gets the message."

And with that, he drove his elbow into Vince's nose.

The crunch of bone on bone echoed through Vince's skull, and the world went pitch black for a few seconds.

"No!" Lea screamed in the darkness. "Don't hurt him!"

"Too late," growled a voice that could've belonged to Freddy Krueger for all he knew, but which probably belonged to Gordo. It sure sounded like something he would say.

A cinderblock slammed into his stomach, and as the air exploded from his lungs, Vince dimly wondered where Gordo could've gotten hold of one on such short notice. The floor rushed up to meet him, catching his knees just in time so he wouldn't have to go through the embarrassment of having his face slide through a puddle of puke that seemed to have materialized by his feet. With a start, he realized the multi-hued vomit belonged to him. The half-digested French fry from Doyle Lipton's lunch was proof enough of that.

With stars dancing in front of his eyes, Vince looked up from his kneeling position to find the cinderblock swooping down on him. But it wasn't a hunk of concrete Gordo was wielding, just one of his ham-sized fists.

Flesh, concrete, in the end the form of the weapon didn't matter. The painful impact it made was all the same to Vince as he crashed backward into the barstools, before sliding bonelessly to the warped and faded wooden flooring.

Vince was pretty sure the beating was over when Gordo stopped kicking him in the ribs. It was either that, or Gordo's foot was getting tired and he was taking a break.

Somewhere close by, Lea was sobbing. He recognized the snuffling sound she made when her nose was filled with mucus, but with one eye swelled shut and the other only seeing the colored spots of light that danced in his vision, it was hard to figure out if she was on the other side of the tavern, or standing right next to him. The ringing in his skull didn't do much to help him judge distances.

"Don't cry, baby," he said. "I'm okay."

At least that's what he meant to say. But the way the words sounded in his ears, they were coming out like gibberish, probably because he'd accidentally chomped down on the side of his tongue somewhere between the elbow to his nose and the size twelve boot to his abdomen. Well, maybe Lea was having better luck understanding him.

Meaty hands grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him to his feet. For a moment, his mind flashed on an image: a scene from an episode of *The Simpsons*, where Homer was growling, "Time to take out the trash." Vince giggled, unable to stop himself. It was stupid, he knew, laughing over a cartoon when he'd just been stomped on by a psycho ex-Marine, but he couldn't help it.

Life's funny that way, as Mom used to say.

He felt himself being propelled forward, feet sliding across the floor, but where was he going? The answer came when he heard the alley door bang open, and then he was airborne, pinwheeling off the back steps to land in a heap at the bottom. He thought he heard Lea start to say something, but the door slammed shut before he could make out the words.

Vince lay on the ground in the fetal position, letting the pain wash over him, waiting for his lungs to stop aching before he risked taking a deep breath. It gave him time to take stock of his injuries: the

broken nose and sore ribs, the swollen eye and cut lip, the scrapes and scuffs and snot bubbles.

And the broken heart. He couldn't leave that one out because it was the one that hurt the most, the one that would take the longest to heal.

Groaning loudly, Vince rolled himself onto his knees and elbows. The way he felt, moving too quickly might cause him to spew his guts, or maybe black out, and the last thing he needed at this point was to slam his jaw into the pavement and knock out some teeth.

He was just steeling himself to attempt an upright position when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps heading his way from the street. Lea, he thought. She ran out the front door when Gordo wasn't lookin', and now she's coming to get me. Everything's gonna be okay now.

He opened his one good eye, and forced a lopsided grin onto his face. "Baby..." he began, then stopped, the grin melting into a hard sneer.

It wasn't Lea. It was Michael and Muriel.

"Son of a bitch!" Vince snapped. The swelling of his bitten tongue had gone down, making his pronunciations far more intelligible, even if they were only curses. "Who are you freaks? Can't you take 'no' for an answer? What the hell do you want from me?"

Muriel stopped in front of him and extended her hand, obviously offering him assistance so he could get to his feet. Vince glared at her until she slowly, reluctantly, withdrew the offer. "We only want to help you, Vince."

"Help someone else," he replied bitterly. "I don't need your pity."

"We're not pitying you," she insisted. "We're trying to save you before it's too late."

"She's right, Vince," Michael chimed in. "Time is running out."

"I don't care!" Vince shouted. Using the back stairs for support, he pushed himself to a standing position. He staggered forward, forcing his way past the Beautiful People, silently congratulating himself for being able to do so without falling over and headed for the street.

"Vince..." Muriel called after him.

"Leave me the hell alone!" he said over his shoulder.

"You don't really mean that," she said. "I know you don't."

Vince paused at the entrance to the alley, and looked back. "You don't know me at all, lady. You just think you do."

"I know everything I need to know about you, Vince Hansen," she said with a gentle smile. "I know you've been Chosen."

Vince grunted. Back to that crap again. Well, he wasn't going to get pulled into another frustrating, circular conversation about God and heaven and his poor soul, not when he felt like a refugee from a George Romero zombie movie. Probably looked like one, too, he mused.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, he turned away from the two would-be saviors and hobbled off to find his car. Had he taken a moment to glance back over his shoulder, he might have realized they were no longer there, although the only way out of the alley was the route he was taking. Silently, suddenly, Michael and Muriel had disappeared.

Vanished, as though scooped up by the Hand of God.

SIX

The drive back home usually didn't take that long—about ten minutes from the Terminal to his front door—but with one eye shut and the other a little bleary in the depth perception category, Vince wisely chose to take it slow. Besides, what would he be rushing home for? Another lonely night of drinking and feeling sorry for himself? Plenty of time to do that tomorrow; it wasn't like he had to worry about waking up late for work, right?

He stayed on the back roads and side streets, wanting to avoid any traffic on the main thoroughfares that might slow his progress even more and draw the attention of any cops to the slight weaving of his car. Well, "slight" if you considered swerving across both sides of the street in widening arcs a minor infraction. Bad enough he hadn't been at the Terminal long enough to get even the smallest alcoholic buzz going, but to get pulled over and hit with another DUI ticket without being drunk would have added insult to injury.

Make that "injuries," he thought, wincing. He sure as hell was gonna be sore in the morning.

As he drove down Ashbury Place, Vince reduced his speed, mindful of the kids running around in the dwindling sunset, that time between the last bloodred hues of the day and the first flickers of artificial lighting. When he focused on what was going on around him, Vince noticed that the kids didn't seem to be racing toward their homes so much as putting distance between them and his car.

Geez, he thought. A couple rust holes in a muffler, and everybody runs for the hills. Buncha drama queens.

He glanced out his window and caught sight of Speed sitting on the porch of his house. Knowing the ex-biker, it wouldn't have surprised Vince to learn he'd been sitting there since they'd been drinking that afternoon. Well, except for bathroom breaks, of course. Not even Speed was tough enough to ignore the call of nature. He honked the horn a couple times and waved a hand out the window. Speed held up a hand in acknowledgment; for some reason, he was grinning from ear to ear.

A happy Speed? That was a rarity, like Halley's Comet or the Boston Red Sox making it to the World Series. Well, maybe he'd become restless after their cocktail hour and called one of those "physical therapists" he frequented, asked her to come over for a special session. Probably Mercedes or Socorro: Speed had a thing for Latin women.

Whatever the reason for his buddy's current state of euphoria—and if he didn't feel like ten pounds of crap crammed into a five-pound bag, he might've stopped to find out—Vince had other matters to concern himself with. Right now, making sure he didn't slam his Camaro into oncoming traffic before he made it to his driveway was at the top of the list.

And then tomorrow I oughtta look into what it'd cost to get the muffler fixed so it'll stop scaring kids, he thought, then frowned. Oh, but I'd have to have a friggin' job to *pay* for getting' the muffler fixed, wouldn't I?

It was that galling reminder of how badly the entire day had gone that kept him company through the remaining blocks to his house. And then it followed him inside.

He stepped through the door and clomped his way up the stairs to the bathroom, where he flicked on the overhead light and dragged himself across the pink-and-white floor tiles to the sink. Then he reluctantly looked in the mirror to check if the beating he'd taken was as bad as it felt.

It was bad, all right, which wasn't all that hard to believe. In fact, he'd been expecting to see worse, but considering that Gordo had been trained to kill guys in a hundred different ways, a broken nose, a split lip and a black eye was getting off lightly. Gordo must've held back because of Lea and by "holding back," he meant the jackass had stopped short of outright slaughtering him. Well, the blood would wash off, ice packs would reduce the size of his inflated lip and left eye, and a handful of Tylenol ought to ease the pain in his ribs. He decided to wait until later to take off his shirt and check how many boot prints Gordo had left on his chest; he just wasn't in the mood right now to find out.

He settled for gently touching the sides of his nose with his fingertips, just to make sure his nose really was completely messed up. When that didn't cause him to pass out or start a new stream of blood and snot to cover the layer that had already hardened around his mouth and along his chin, he prodded a little harder. Much to his surprise, there was no grinding of bone and cartilage, a sure sign it wasn't broken after all. And Vince knew a broken nose, having experienced his first back when he was fifteen. It would be swollen for a few days, and hurt like absolute hell, but at least he wouldn't need to have it reset.

Vince turned on the tap and let the water run until it was hot enough, then grabbed the bar of Irish Spring off the soap dish and started cleaning up his face and hands. He did it slowly—his injuries not really giving him any choice—and soon enough had washed off the grime and bodily fluids. He still looked like crap, but now it was clean-smelling crap; good enough for a start.

Beside the sink, a metal shelf bolted to the wall held a variety of hair care products, shaving creams, razors and a box of tampons. Lea's, of course. Vince regarded it for a moment, then shrugged. "Guess I don't need to hang onto that now," he muttered. He reached past the box and pulled down a plastic mug he used for a water cup. He filled it in the sink, then slid aside the mirror to get to the post-bar crawling essentials: aspirin, bandages, Neosporin for the cuts, and a large bottle of Tylenol. He shook out four capsules, popped them in his mouth, and washed them down with the water.

"That's enough for one night," he commented, and shambled from the bathroom, leaning against the hallway wall for support as he made his way toward the bedroom. With luck—and what, exactly, made him think he might have any, given the day he'd just had?—he'd be able to collapse on the bed before his legs gave out.

He woke up on the floor, next to the bed.
Vince sighed. "Close enough, I guess."

Grabbing the edge of the box spring, he pulled himself up to a sitting position and groaned. Now he had a stiff back to add to the list of punishments his body had had to endure last night. With a great deal of effort, he half-rolled, half-stood until he was able to drop onto the bed properly.

That was when his clock radio snapped on for his usual seven am wakeup. "—nation is still reeling from the assassination attempt made on the president last night as his motorcade left the White House, en route to his intended speech to the nation from the Capitol. At this time, the death toll stands at thirty-seven, including the two assassins, with casualties in the dozens. Sources in the FBI report that the rocket-propelled grenade fired at the motorcade destroyed two Secret Service vehicles, killing six agents; the president, however, was unharmed. He and the vice president have been flown to secret locations."

What the hell was going on in the world, Vince wondered? Satellites going down, some whack-job trying to kill the president, North Korea stirring things up.

He paused and stared at the ceiling while those thoughts played in his head. Maybe those two religious fanatics, Michael and Muriel, were right, and Judgment Day was coming. Maybe he needed to take stock of things, start worrying about his soul and stuff like that.

"And maybe that's a load of bull," he told himself. "They're just out to make a buck, like everybody else. God, UFOs, World War III, whatever it takes to fill the collection plate."

He rolled onto his side, pulled a corner of the blanket over his head to block out the sunlight streaming through his windows and went back to sleep. After all, he figured, the world's problems had nothing to do with him. It'd straighten itself out in the end, right? It always did, and whether or not Vincent J Hansen was awake or asleep to see it happen, the result would be the same: the world would go on, ready to tear his life apart the next day.

It was not an opinion shared by everyone.

As Vince lay passed out on his bedroom floor during the night, a few blocks away, Speed Moorcock was just settling in for an evening of televised entertainment, and for him, life was good. A cool night with the windows open, Chinese take-out for dinner, a couple hard lemonades to wash it down and a six-hour marathon of *Monster Garage* episodes on the Discovery Channel. It didn't get any better.

Not that the afternoon hadn't contained some equally pleasurable moments. After Vince took off for his interview at Doyle Lipton's place—and by the way he'd driven by later without stopping, odds were good he didn't get the gig—Speed had sat around for awhile, until he got tired of watching the Jesus Freaks canvassing the block. At some point, he'd reached over to the card table to look at the lottery tickets Vince had picked up for him, and his gaze had fallen on the *Spiced Girls Lingerie Special*.

Thoughts of shapely young bodies prancing about in next to nothing led to a call for attention from his libido, and before he knew it he was on the phone to Socorro, a coffee-tanned beauty who'd helped him through some rough times since his wipeout. Luckily, he caught her between appointments, and she was able to hurry over and administer some "special" therapy before she had to meet her next client. As always, the session left him feeling invigorated, ready to take on the world.

He settled for grabbing a beer from the fridge, then rolling his chair in front of the TV and watching *Judge Judy*.

After that, it was back to the porch to watch the sun go down. He hardly ever paid attention to the news. It made him too angry, hearing about places he'd never go, asses he'd never get to kick. But since his current situation wasn't about to change anytime soon, unless the government had some kind of bionic super soldier program like Art Bell insisted when he talked about it on his radio show, and an ex-biker was at the top of their list of potential guinea pigs, it was best to just avoid having to listen to the mess the world was in. He didn't need the elevated blood pressure.

Monster Garage, on the other hand, was something he couldn't get enough of, like *American Chopper* and that T-and-A chick series *She-Spies*, shows he looked forward to with as much pleasure as the

prospect of a roll in the sheets with Socorro; sometimes even more, if the episode promos looked really good. And a day that actually worked out so it combined the two, well, it made him feel like king of the friggin' world.

He used the remote to turn on the television, and hit the preset button for the Discovery Channel. A moment later a picture formed, but it wasn't of anything he'd expected to see. Instead of Jesse James and his crew of mechanics getting ready for their next tear-down/build-up project, there was a notice to cable subscribers: "DUE TO TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES WITH OUR SATELLITE NETWORK, WE ARE UNABLE TO PROVIDE YOU WITH SERVICE. PLEASE CONTACT YOUR LOCAL CABLE PROVIDER FOR FURTHER INFORMATION. WE APOLOGIZE FOR THE INCONVENIENCE."

"Damn it!" Speed barked. No access to cable meant he was stuck with the boring network crap he never bothered watching. He hated sitcoms: there hadn't been a good one on TV since *Sanford and Son* went off the air. And reality shows bored him. That didn't leave a whole lot to choose from, and he'd never been the public television/*This Old House*/*Antiques Roadshow* kind of viewer.

So, what was left? His gaze drifted toward the row of videotapes stored under the television. No, he wasn't really interested in replaying one of the adult films from his vast collection. Socorro had already scratched that particular itch. And something like *Easy Rider* or *Bullitt* was best left for a rainy day, when his mood usually darkened to match the weather; being stuck in the house made him reflect too much on the uselessness of his legs.

And that was when he remembered the tape those two aspiring soulsavers, Michael and Muriel, had given him. He hadn't thought about it since the morning and was surprised to realize he hadn't already tossed it in the trash; at least he didn't think he'd put it there. But now that it'd popped into his mind, he recalled Vince's comment about how those people had seemed to know so much about him. It made him curious to see what kind of information they might have on him, as well.

"Yeah, but where the hell did I put the damn thing?" he muttered.

Speed rolled his chair back from the small metal tray table that held his dinner and looked around the room. It wasn't in the video collection, didn't even appear to be in the living room. He wheeled himself out to the hallway and down to his bedroom. It used to be the dining room before the accident, but since he'd never had the money to make the house handicap accessible, getting up to the second floor was a complete impossibility. If it hadn't been for Rick Lowell and some of the other brothers in Hell's Guardians building a bathroom for him from a hall closet, the first floor would be a helluva lot messier than it usually was.

But all the bedroom held were recent pleasant memories, the air heavy with the tangy odor of sweat and sex mingled with the flowery scent of Socorro's perfume. There were no videotapes to be found here, just piles of clothing to be washed, and tangled sheets, and a half-empty box of condoms.

He headed for the kitchen, giving the bathroom a cursory glance on the way; he never would have left it in there. Once he reached his objective, he opened drawers, pushed aside cereal boxes and avoided looking at the unintended experiment in penicillin creation that used to be a loaf of Wonderbread.

Speed paused to mentally retrace his movements after slamming the front door in Michael's smug face, then he lightly slapped his forehead. "That's right!" he said, and wheeled over to the refrigerator. He opened it, and there, lying on the top shelf between the milk and a six-pack of Budweiser was the videotape bearing his name. It made sense in a way. He'd gone from the door to the kitchen to make coffee before the water he'd put on all boiled away. In his anger at having been disturbed by a couple of religious fanatics, insistent ones, at that, he'd thrown the tape into the fridge when he reached for the milk. A cup of coffee later and he'd forgotten all about it.

He returned to the living room and popped the tape into the VCR. There was a brief bit of static and electronic snow as the tape advanced past the leader, and then a woman appeared on the screen. She was a redhead, in her twenties, and not even the desk she was sitting behind could disguise the fact that the good Lord had blessed

her with a world-class rack. Speed hadn't seen a pair that fine since those Saturday nights he used to spend over at the Pelican Briefs ten years ago. Vince's ex, Lea, came pretty close, though. Maybe now that she was unattached, she'd be in the mood to trade up.

Nah, Speed concluded. He was no prize, either and besides, Vince was his best friend. In fact, he should feel guilty for just thinking about making a play for his buddy's girl, even if she wasn't his girl anymore. But he didn't.

"Let it go, boy," he chided himself. "Let it go."

"Hello, Eugene," the woman said. She had a sultry voice, like a young Lauren Bacall, and a warm, inviting smile that actually sent a welcome chill up his spine. He was so immediately taken with the flame-haired spokeswoman that he hadn't even bristled at her use of his real name.

"Okay, honey, you got my attention," Speed said. "What's the pitch?"

The smile slowly faded into a look of great concern. Speed couldn't help but notice how beautifully green her eyes were. "I imagine you've been feeling pretty down about yourself these past six years," she began, "what with your terrible accident, and then the painful rehabilitation process that followed. It left you feeling, what? Lacking? Less than a man?"

"Don't think Socorro'd agree with you on that one, honey," he replied, chuckling.

"And before that, you were the rebellious spirit who refused to listen to reason, at home, in school, on the streets. But didn't even you reach a point when you tired of the brawling, the drinking and carousing, the arrests, the weeks and months spent in jails, time that could have been spent bettering yourself?"

Speed scratched his beard and frowned. Sure, there'd been moments like that, when he wondered if he'd been wasting his life traveling around with the Guardians, but would he have traded it all in for a chance to saddle himself with a nagging wife and a couple of whiny brats? Oh, hell, no! Still, he had to admit he had outgrown the constant need to raise little hell, even before the wipeout. He'd figured that either meant he was showing some signs of maturity, or

his body was no longer able to handle the abuse it'd been taking for over twenty years. Whatever the reason, it sure had been a helluva good ride while it lasted.

"I know the past few years have been especially hard on you, Eugene," the woman continued, her voice straining a bit. Tears had formed in the corners of her eyes. "You expected more out of life than to spend your remaining years confined to a wheelchair, didn't you?"

"Damn straight," Speed mumbled darkly. "Thanks for pointin' that out, lady."

"A man who normally prided himself on his independence, reduced to relying on others to do even simple tasks, like going up and down stairs." She shook her head. "I can only imagine what that must feel like for you, to have that independence taken away by a cruel trick of nature, a tiny patch of ice, and it truly breaks my heart." She pulled a handkerchief from the breast pocket of her dark blazer as the tears began to roll down her cheeks. She dabbed at her eyes, flashing an embarrassed smile. "I... I'm sorry. I tend to get a little emotional about these things. I know I shouldn't; you've learned to come to terms with your problems so why shouldn't I?" She wiped her nose and sniffed quietly. "I try not to get so worked up by the suffering of others, but I do. I hope you'll forgive me."

Speed studied her expression. It didn't look put-on, didn't seem insincere, or gratingly pitying; she appeared genuinely saddened by his condition. That surprised him and touched him. No one had ever shown such concern for him, for his loss; not even the Guardians. The only person who'd ever cried for Speed Moorcock had been Speed Moorcock, quietly, at night, when he'd buried his head in the hospital pillows so no one could hear him. Maybe these religious types weren't as bad as he'd thought.

"But there's more to an ex-motorcyclist named Eugene Moorcock than just paralyzed legs and a criminal record and dreams of what might have been—isn't there?" she asked, red-eyed. "There's something inside you, Eugene, something worth rescuing. Something that deserves a second chance. Maybe you haven't realized it yet, or maybe you've known it all along and just never admitted it to

yourself. The how and the why don't really matter; what does is that *we*, my friends and I, know how special you really are. That's why you've been contacted." The warm smile returned, shining brightly through the veil of tears. "That's why you've been Chosen."

The picture cut out at that point, and the screen went blank.

"Wow," Speed said, after a few seconds.

He leaned back in his chair and rested his chin on his hand, eyes fixed on the darkened television. It wasn't the sort of pitch he'd expected: no pleas for donations, no fire-and-brimstone/you're going straight to hell for your sins kind of sermon, no "God is cool" MTV-style video showing how wonderful the Almighty is. Hell, they didn't even try to sell him anything.

The message, though, was pretty clear: for perhaps the first time ever, someone was telling Eugene Moorcock that his life had merit. Maybe not a great deal of merit—one glance at his rap sheet and most people would wonder why the guy was even out on the streets—but at least the spokeswoman hadn't called him a boil on the ass of humanity sorely in need of lancing. He'd take whatever compliment he could get.

Of course, the first question that immediately sprang to mind was why anyone would think he was a prime candidate for a new lease on life. It wasn't like he was about to turn down assistance out of hand; he just wanted to know what it was going to cost him.

But maybe that didn't matter, he considered. After all, if these people knew all about him, they must be aware that he didn't have any real money to be conned out of. The cash he lived on mostly came from Disability. He'd already burned through a great deal of the settlement reached in the civil suit he'd won after suing the state for causing his accident. The jury had decided it wouldn't have happened if the state had made sure the road was clear of ice. Its negligence became his windfall. But it was a short-lived financial gain and soon the money would totally run out.

At least the house was all paid off; the electricity, gas and water bills, however, would be another problem in a few months. And then the property taxes would be due, and he already knew he wouldn't be

able to make that. By this time next year, it was more than a distinct possibility that he'd be living in the streets.

So: a group preaching the Good Word, saying there was a part of him worth salvaging; that they cared about him, wanted to help him. Well, at this stage of the game, what did he have to lose by giving them a shot? Maybe next time they came around, he'd actually take the time to hear them out instead of showing them the door, with his foot metaphorically planted up their butts.

It'd be the proper, Christian thing to do, right?

Lea was on her way home when the couple approached her.

She hadn't noticed them in her path when she last glanced up from staring at the ground directly in front of her. For all she knew, they'd materialized out of thin air. It wasn't like she'd expected to run into anyone on the street. At five-thirty in the morning, she usually had the city to herself, except for newsstand owners opening their kiosks for the day and garbage men making their rounds. in their big, noisy trucks. To meet up with two such well-dressed people who looked like models from a fashion magazine at such an unusual hour, well, it just wasn't the kind of thing that happened to her.

"Hello, Lea," the woman said. She was an absolute stunner, with dark skin that seemed to glow in the artificial light of the street lamps; skin so perfect, so flawless, it made Lea unconsciously touch her own face and grimace at the oil she felt on her forehead. Probably another pimple forming, she thought darkly.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"No, but we know you," the woman replied. She smiled, revealing perfect, white teeth, of course, and gestured toward her companion. "This is Michael, and I am Muriel."

"How do you do?" Lea asked the man; he nodded pleasantly at her. She glanced around the area, hoping to spot a bus or a cab or a police car passing by, in case she needed to call for help; even an early morning jogger would have done the trick. But the trio was alone on

the street; it would be another hour or so before the morning rush to work started.

"We tried to speak with you at your apartment," Muriel said. "Several times, in fact, but we always seemed to miss you."

Lucky me, she thought, and a chill went up her spine. Who the hell were these people, and what did they want with her? They must have been keeping tabs on her, otherwise how else could they know about the pre-dawn route she usually walked to get to her place? Strangely, though, she found herself repressing the urge to turn and run. Could be because she was curious to see where this conversation was going; could be because she wasn't getting any weird vibes from this duo that would indicate they meant her harm. Or maybe it was because she figured that, even with her daily trips to the gym and the self-defense class she took a few years back, she didn't have a chance of outdistancing this Michael guy, or fighting him off once he caught up with her. Even under his suit, she could tell he was cut like an Adonis, and with those long legs of his, he could probably run like the wind.

"Well, I keep kinda odd hours," she mumbled. She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, back in the direction of the Terminal. "You could've just stopped by at the bar where I work if you wanted to talk to me."

Muriel shook her head, and looked surprised by the suggestion. "Oh, no. We could never go into one of those places."

Lea raised a quizzical eyebrow. "One of those places? What's that supposed to mean?"

Muriel glanced around, as though to make certain no one could overhear her, then leaned in close to Lea. "You know," she said softly. "Dens of iniquity." She stepped back, waving a knowing finger at her. "'Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging,' as it says in the Good Book."

"No place for a minister's daughter, as my mom used to say, huh?" Lea replied.

Muriel smiled. "That, too."

"Riiight." Lea did her best to smile back, but it was forced, plastered on in a weak attempt to look sincere. What she really

meant to do was sneer. After spending the past ten hours on her feet, and being a horrified eyewitness to her ex-boyfriend's savage beating by her boss, she wasn't in the mood to deal with religious nuts. "Look, this really isn't a good time for this. I just got off work, and I'm dead tired—"

"Will you call Vince when you get home?" Muriel asked.

Lea blinked, caught totally off-guard by the question. "Excuse me?"

"I asked if you were planning to call Vince Hansen when you got home," she replied. "To see how he was doing. Michael and I talked to him just after his somewhat rude ejection from your workplace." She shook her head and frowned. "He didn't appear to be in the best of health when he left us."

Lea suddenly felt nauseous. For all she knew, Vince could be lying in a hospital right now, suffering from broken bones or a concussion or a dozen other life-threatening maladies after that beating he took from Gordo. Didn't she once read about a guy who banged his stomach hard into a doorknob, then keeled over dead a few days later because he had internal bleeding and nobody realized it? Gordo used to be a Marine. There were probably hundreds of brutal methods he'd been taught by Uncle Sam to use against an enemy; maybe some involved injuring a man so he'd die slowly, never knowing he was living on borrowed time until it was too late.

But had she done anything to find out about Vince's condition in the hours that followed? No, she'd just dried her tears and gone back to work, assuring herself he was fine, that it was his own fault for showing up and causing trouble. That was one of the reasons she left him, wasn't it: because he wouldn't listen to advice, wouldn't pay attention when someone was trying to tell him something important? When it came right down to it, the only person to blame for the one-sided brawl was Vince, who should have had more smarts than to tell a trained killer to mind his own business and expect him to listen. True, Gordo'd had no right to get so damned medieval on his ass, but he was only looking out for his favorite waitress, and she couldn't really fault him for possessing an overdeveloped sense of chivalry. And yet...

"Do... do you know if he went to see a doctor?" she asked hesitantly, her throat suddenly feeling very tight.

Michael smiled knowingly. "If he had, that wouldn't be Vince, now, would it?"

"Umm... no, I guess not," she reluctantly agreed. She eyed him suspiciously; apparently she wasn't the only one they'd been keeping an eye on.

"He's at home," Muriel said. "Sleeping, I'd imagine."

"O-okay. I'll call him in the morning, then." Lea paused to look at the lightening sky. "I-I mean, later today." She took a step to the right, to go around the couple. "It was... nice meeting you."

Muriel gently placed a hand on her arm as she started to go by. Lea stiffened and bit down on her bottom lip to suppress a small cry of alarm. "Just a moment, Lea. We'd like to talk to you about something; it won't take long."

Lea politely pulled away. "Like I said before, this really isn't a—"

"I'm only asking for a minute of your time," Muriel replied. She smiled pleasantly, but there was a look in her eyes that made Lea freeze in her tracks, one that made it clear how important it was that she listen to what this beautiful woman had to say.

"Okay," she said.

Muriel studied her face for a couple of seconds, probably to make sure Lea was being honest about her willingness to listen, and that she wasn't going to take off anyway. "Michael and I are here to offer you a chance at a new life."

Well, that's a different approach, Lea thought. Usually these types start off by asking me if I've thought about God lately and if I haven't, then why not? I don't remember any of them ever offering me anything.

"And what kind of 'new life' would that be?" she asked. It was hard to keep the sarcasm out of her voice, but she thought she'd managed to pull it off.

"As a member of the Chosen," Muriel replied.

"Oh." Lea paused a moment to consider that. "And have I been Chosen?"

"Without a doubt," Michael answered. When he smiled, she felt the skin on her arms going all goosebumpy, and she suddenly felt like it was 1991 and she was sixteen years old again, watching Mel Gibson in the movie version of *Hamlet*. She managed to keep from giggling, but couldn't help grinning at him. God, he's got a great smile, she thought. Why couldn't I have met this guy before he found Jesus?

"And what kind of benefits come from being Chosen?" she asked, unable to keep her eyes off him. She gestured at their clothes. "A bigger wardrobe budget?"

"For starters," he replied. "But the ultimate rewards are more of a... spiritual nature."

Strangely enough, there was nothing about the answer that made her feel like laughing in his face. The tone of his voice, the set of his eyes (they were so blue!), the position of his body language, all seemed to indicate he was simply telling her the truth as he knew it. It didn't come off like he was trying to hit her with a well-practiced spiel, like a used car salesman would do. Or a carnival huckster.

Or a televangelist, she thought. Good-looking they might be, but they're still religious advocates, right?

"And how would one go about getting these rewards?" she responded slowly. "That is, if they were interested in them?"

"Someone like, say, a friend of yours?" Michael asked with a sly wink. Lea found her attention completely focused on him, like Muriel wasn't even there. But Lea didn't mind. The view was pretty good from where she was standing. "Well, let's say your friend has had some tough times in her life, things that might've gone better for her if her choices had been different. Maybe she picked the wrong job, or the wrong kind of boyfriend."

Lea winced. This was already hitting too close to home for her liking. Maybe watching her wasn't all these people did. If they knew other stuff about her, then they must be running background checks, talking to people who knew her. She suddenly had a mental image of these smiling, happy people showing up on her parents' doorstep, hoping they could ask some questions about the Prestons' daughter. Mom probably would've invited them right in, offered them

something to drink, and then started running off at the mouth, describing the scandalous life her only child led: no husband, no children, working a disgraceful job as a waitress in a beer hall of all places. She was making the family the embarrassment of the neighborhood. We'd had such great hopes for her, you see.

"What we're offering your friend," Michael continued, interrupting her reverie, "is an opportunity to start over, wipe the slate clean of her mistakes."

"And how would you do that?" Lea asked. "What would she have to do to earn it?"

"She's already earned it," Michael replied, as though there could be no other answer.

Lea eyed him suspiciously. "I don't understand."

Muriel reached into her handbag and pulled out a black, unmarked DVD case. "I think this might help."

Lea accepted it, then opened it. Inside was a shiny new disk, her name handwritten across the surface in gold ink. Nice penmanship, she thought. She looked back to Muriel. "What's on it?"

"Play it," Michael said. "Why should we spoil any surprises?" And here came that thousand-watt smile again, making her blush.

"We'll talk after you've had a chance to see it," Muriel said.

Lea shrugged noncommittally and slipped the gift into her own bag. "I'll look at it, but that doesn't mean I'm buying into this whole 'second chance' thing." A hint of a smirk played at the left corner of her mouth. "Nobody just starts over fresh, unless they're in some kind of Witness Protection program."

"Well, I can assure you that the members of our congregation have nothing to do with law enforcement," Michael commented good-naturedly. "Or organized crime."

The smirk became a full grin. "Just a bunch of Merry Christians out to save the world from itself, huh?"

Michael nodded. "Something like that."

Lea looked past the couple. The sun was just starting to come over the horizon, painting the sky in warm rose and marigold. It forced a weary sigh from her lips. If not for these two, she'd already be home

with the shades pulled down, safe from being presented with another cosmic reminder of her artistic inadequacies.

"We should let you get home," Muriel said. "You look like you could use some rest. Maybe we'll have a chance to speak with you this afternoon, after you've played the disk."

Lea sighed. "Yeah, I guess so."

"It really is important we talk later, Lea," Michael said. He lightly placed a hand on her arm. "Dark times are upon us, and each second that remains becomes ever more precious."

Lea paused. She'd been ready to make some kind of sarcastic remark. How could she pass up the opportunity, when he'd given her such an opening with that overblown declaration? But there was something in his voice, in his gaze, that choked off the words before she could utter them, a look of such fearful urgency that it suddenly made her feel like a cold weight had formed in the pit of her stomach.

"Uh... okay," she said, suddenly aware of how husky her voice sounded to her own ears. She cleared her throat. "How's three o'clock sound?"

Michael and Muriel exchanged a glance, like they were communicating telepathically or something. They both looked worried, as though three was too far off for whatever they wanted to talk about. Finally, he turned back to Lea. "Three o'clock sharp. We'll see you then."

"And be sure to call Vince when you get the chance," Muriel added pleasantly. "Just to make sure he's all right."

"Sure," Lea mumbled, although she knew she probably wouldn't, in the end, even if her first intention had been to do just that. Now that she considered the situation, if Vince was sleeping off his injuries at home, as Muriel had mentioned, then he was as okay as he was going to be until he healed. The last thing she wanted to do was give him the impression that she'd come running over to take care of him; that would just start the whining and the begging for her to come back all over again. She was done with that part of her life and there was no going back; Vince would have to learn to accept it.

The couple walked past her, heading in the direction from which she had come, off to continue their rounds, no doubt.

Lea pulled out the DVD case and stared at the personalized disk. No labels, no pamphlets, not even a card listing the chapters, a mystery wrapped in a rectangular plastic box. And here she'd never even read a Nancy Drew book to give her any guidance as to what she might expect to find on it.

She turned around to see where her well-dressed gift-givers were headed and was surprised to discover they were gone. Most likely they'd turned the corner, or gone into one of the apartment buildings on this side of the street. For a couple of laid-back religious types, they sure moved like the wind.

With a shrug, Lea stuffed the disk back into her bag. Mysteries could wait; right now, there was a bed calling to her from six blocks away. Wearily, she started for home as the city slowly awoke to greet the rising sun.

Gonna be a beautiful day, she thought, frowning. Damn it.

SEVEN

When Vince woke up that afternoon, the world was apparently coming apart at the seams.

The radio was still on, so it was hard to miss the urgent tone in the voice of the newscaster: "We're standing by live to bring you an update on the current talks being held at the United Nations. There is growing concern about reports of a military buildup in Eastern Europe—"

Vince reached over and turned off the radio. "That's enough of that crap."

Gingerly, he rolled out of bed, feeling every ache, every bruise and muscle strain as he forced himself to stand. His head pounded like a mother, and the room had a tendency to tilt to one side, like a bad guy's hideout in old *Batman* TV episodes, but he managed to remain upright as he tottered over to the bathroom.

The sight that greeted him when he turned on the light and looked in the mirror was something he could have done without seeing. His nose was swollen and inflamed, as was his bottom lip, and his left eye was in need of an ice pack. He could barely see past the extreme puffiness. Both of his hands were scraped and cut along the knuckles, the palms raw and tender, probably from when he hit the ground after his short flight down the Terminal's back stairs.

He smelled bad, too; a pungent combination of spilled alcohol from the bar and stagnant water and urine from the alley that had soaked into his clothes while he slept. For a moment or five, he pondered the best possible solution to removing the stench from his rumpled outfit and the bedsheets. Burning them in the backyard would certainly be cheaper than dropping them off at the neighborhood laundromat, but then he'd just have to pay to replace everything. He finally opted for the professional cleaning, but whether the nice Korean lady who owned the place would actually agree to even touch them once she opened the laundry bag and caught a whiff of its contents, well, that was anybody's guess.

Slowly, achingly, he stripped off his clothes to inspect the mass of black-and-blue marks that dotted his torso like meteor impact craters on the surface of the moon. The reddish, blood-tinged edges of the bruises looked particularly gruesome under the fluorescent lighting.

Vince frowned. "That's the last time that jackass gets any of *my* business."

He turned on the shower, relieved himself while he waited for the water to get hot enough, then dragged himself into the bathtub. He didn't really wash himself as much as just stood under the nozzle and let the hot water do the work. It felt even better when he turned on the pulsing shower jet and the high-powered massaging action started relaxing his overly tired muscles.

Staring up at the large plastic device attached to the showerhead, Vince wistfully remembered how Lea had insisted on buying it for him as an early birthday present. Then his expression darkened. That gift represented one of the few things they'd been able to enjoy together in the last weeks before the breakup. But after they had their very public disagreement at the Terminal, he'd thought about taking a wrench to the thing and smashing it off the pipe. When he finally realized it was the alcohol doing the thinking for him, he'd walked away from the toolbox and settled for having another beer. Besides, he reflected, why shouldn't he make use of it? If that bitch wasn't willing to get back together with him—and if getting trashed by Gordo last night wasn't the period at the end of that sentence, he didn't know what was—then why give her the satisfaction of denying himself a good shower massage? Let her get her own if she wanted one so much.

Eventually, he pulled himself out from under the water and toweled off. He was far from feeling a hundred percent better since practically every movement resulted in another stinging muscle ache, but at least he didn't smell like he'd spent the night sleeping in an alley. The thought of shaving passed through his mind. It was a morning ritual he normally wouldn't bother doing when he had no place to go, like a job, but a glance in the mirror confirmed that he needed one. And yet, considering how much his face was hurting

(courtesy of Gordo's anvil-like fists), the possibility of adding cuts and razor burn to the list of injuries seemed like something best avoided for the time being. Instead, he popped a few more Tylenol, washed them down with water and returned to the bedroom, the towel wrapped around his waist.

He stepped back out into the hallway twenty minutes later, dressed in a white T-shirt, blue jeans and worn-out sneakers, hair still damp and head still aching with each step he took. The trip down the stairs to the first floor was a slow-going affair, what with his knees being stiff and sore, but he eventually succeeded in reaching the bottom without taking a head-first tumble. From there, he tottered into the kitchen in search of coffee for his morning caffeine fix and a tray of ice cubes to ease the pain of his throbbing face.

While he waited for the water for his coffee to come to a boil, he dumped the cubes into a terrycloth hand towel usually reserved for drying dishes. Since most of his meals were of the takeout variety, it didn't see much use. With the ice pack lightly pressed over the left side of his face, Vince walked over to the living room and dropped bonelessly onto the couch. It was only after he'd comfortably settled in on the cushions that he realized he'd only have to get up again in a few minutes when the kettle whistled. He sighed wearily and grabbed the remote from the coffee table.

What greeted him when he activated the TV was a short burst of static, followed by a blacked-out screen and a piercing wail.

"Damn it!" Vince yelled, wincing. That was all he needed: an audio ice pick stabbing his eardrums, adding to his pains. He pressed the volume control and kept his thumb on it, watching the green sound bars on the TV screen reducing in number; when the decibels had reached an acceptable level, he relaxed his grip. The sound bars disappeared, yet the image on the screen remained a featureless blue field, and the siren continued its high-pitched scream for the next few seconds. It suddenly cut off, and for a moment, silence reigned. Then a deep, masculine voice filled the void:

"This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. The broadcasters of your area, in voluntary cooperation with the Federal,

State and local authorities, have developed this system to keep you informed in the event of an emergency. If this had been an actual emergency, the Attention Signal you just heard would have been followed by official information, news or instructions. This concludes this test of the Emergency Broadcast System."

Vince stared silently at the television and felt an unexpected chill run up his back. The Emergency Broadcast System? He hadn't heard one of those warnings in he couldn't remember how long. But there was nothing to get worked up about, he assured himself, right? If he remembered correctly, all the TV and radio stations in the country ran tests of the system, just to make sure it was working properly. It was just that, given the situation the world was currently in, with countries mobilizing their armed forces and the satellites shut down, it suddenly felt like things were starting to come to a head. And wasn't that emergency signal first set up in case World War III was breaking out? Back in the early 1960s, according to what his parents used to tell him, everybody had thought the Russians were going to launch their nuclear arsenal at the United States. That's what that whole Cuban Missile Crisis thing almost led up to. That never happened, but with every country in the world and their mothers now having access to A-bomb material—Vince had seen a story about the nuclear black market on *60 Minutes II* about a year ago—and everybody accusing everybody else over how the satellites got messed up, you never knew when one of those whack-job leaders might get it in his head to push the launch button.

Vince sat bolt upright as another shrill sound assaulted his ears. He looked to the television, but the EBS signal was gone, replaced by talk show host Jerry Springer conducting an interview. With a nervous chuckle, Vince turned toward the kitchen and realized the noise was just the kettle calling for his attention.

He levered himself up from the couch with some difficulty, his ribs aching like a bastard, and shuffled into the kitchen. Behind him, the Springer audience screamed for blood, as his audiences usually did, whether it was during an argument between father and daughter about how their special relationship was falling apart (incest was always a popular topic on the show), a catfight involving a scrawny,

methadone-clinic prostitute and a six-foot-two, 300-pound transvestite, or a hot-looking chick telling her parents she was a lesbian Nazi pole dancer converting to Judaism (it was the last part that always brought the mom to tears). No, it wasn't great TV, but it was entertaining enough, in a professional wrestling, driving-past-a-car-wreck kind of way.

Vince tossed a couple teaspoons of sugar into a mug, added a small heap of instant coffee crystals and then filled the cup to the brim with the boiling water. He took a sip and nodded in appreciation. "I like my coffee like I like my women," he used to say to people. "Strong but sweet." Lea used to fit that requirement, before the breakup; now, "strong but bitter" probably described her more accurately.

He tossed the spoon in the sink and returned to the living room, placing the mug on the coffee table. On the television, Springer had been replaced by a live studio shot of Allison Bradley, a local news anchor. It wasn't a bad tradeoff. Bradley was in her late twenties/early thirties, attractive but not supermodel stunning, with dark hair that fell past her shoulders and bright blue eyes that seemed to darken the more intense she became while reporting a story. The only thing that detracted from her good looks, in Vince's opinion, were the glasses she wore: thin, rectangular frames she probably thought made her look more professional, but which only made her look like Velma, the bookwormy girl in the *Scooby Doo* cartoons. Not exactly an image that inspired lustful thoughts among the male viewing demographic, but more than likely that was the idea. No guy wanted to get Velma in bed, he wanted Daphne, 'cause she was the group hottie with that red hair and purple mini-dress. Velma was the smart one, the one you took seriously when she had something to say and the look probably served the same purpose for Allison Bradley.

"-with cable television service around the world affected by the breakdown in satellite communication, news services have been forced to gain information through conventional land-lines, as reporters phone in their stories, file them via computer web cameras, or ship unedited video footage to their stations." The picture shifted to another angle of Bradley, and she turned in her seat to address the

camera. "One such report comes to us courtesy of Martin Wallace of the BBC, who managed to file this account from Hong Kong via streaming video shortly before a total news blackout was enforced." Her eyes narrowed, the irises appearing to shift from blue to a deep purple. "We want to warn you that this footage is of a graphic nature, so you may not wish to see what follows."

Vince hunkered down on the couch. It was basic human nature: tell somebody to turn their head away from something that might disgust them, and they're going to lean in even closer to get a good look at whatever it is. He was no different: show him video of a police car chase that ends up with the criminal plowing into the side of a bus, and he was a happy camper. Show it to him a number of times on the evening news, over and over, in real time and slow motion, and he'd happily analyze it like it was footage from the infamous Zapruda film that documented JFK's assassination. It was one of those not-so-endearing qualities about him that Lea always used to object to.

"Well, she's not here now..." he muttered to the television. "So, bring it on, honey."

An image of a hotel room replaced Bradley, as seen through a low-resolution camera; Vince guessed it was mounted on a laptop computer. There wasn't anything that stood out about the room. Just the usual setup of king-sized bed with clean sheets and a framed print of some kind of painting involving flowers. The rest of the furnishings were a mystery, since the camera's view was straight-ahead; they were probably nothing more than a couple of chairs, a TV bolted to a table and a bathroom, just like in any other hotel in the world.

A black man stepped into the shot. He looked to be in his late fifties, a few pounds overweight but still quite fit, with short hair that was sprinkled with wisps of gray around the temples and sideburns; in a way, he reminded Vince of Danny Glover, that actor in the *Lethal Weapon* movies. There were large bags under his eyes, like he hadn't slept in a few days, and he moved with a nervous sort of energy, constantly looking off-camera as though expecting someone to come bursting into the room.

"This is Martin Wallace," he began, "reporting from the Shangri La Hotel in Hong Kong. Since the breakdown of the global satellite network, Chinese President Jiang Zemin has ordered a gradual buildup of troops in this historic city, the purpose of which remains a closely guarded secret. Speculation, however, indicates that North Korea's recent accusation that the United States is responsible for the blackout has found a sympathetic ear in Beijing."

The sound of loud shouting in the hallway, punctured by the occasional yelp of terror, filtered into the room. Wallace again looked off-camera, then back. Sweat beaded on his forehead and he wiped it away with the cuff of his shirt.

"They're rounding up all foreign correspondents," he said breathlessly. "It appears they're attempting to shut down all lines of outside communication in an effort to keep the rest of the world from knowing the government's plans."

The shouting increased in volume, and now doors could be heard slamming, or being smashed in. There was a burst of gunfire.

"Oh, God..." Wallace said in a hoarse whisper. He leaned closer toward the camera and Vince unconsciously did the same with the television. "My sources in Beijing have told me that the families of the government's top-level officials are being moved further inland, away from major cities. No one outside of the inner circle of the Communist leadership was supposed to know about it, but I'm afraid they've found out about my—"

A loud booming noise filled the room, like the door had been blown off its hinges, and Wallace fell to the left, dropping from view. He screamed as blurry forms—men in dark-green military uniforms—flooded into the shot. There was a brief struggle as Wallace fought off the soldiers trying to grab him, but a rifle butt swept down to smack into his head.

Vince's eyes widened in disbelief. "Jesus..."

Wallace was dragged to his feet, blood streaming down his face from a deep cut across his forehead. There was a wild, confused look in his eyes, like he was going into shock, and it was clear he didn't understand what the soldiers were demanding of him as they barked questions in their native tongue. When they received no response,

one of the men slapped him across the mouth, hard enough to draw more blood.

Dazed, the reporter started to say something, but only his lips moved. No sound came out. His gaze drifted toward the laptop camera, and his face twisted in a heartbreaking expression of hopelessness and despair. Here was a man who knew he was going to die.

A dark shape moved in front of the camera, cutting off the view; apparently, someone had stepped into the shot. Hands gripped the computer, and the camera shook violently. There was a burst of static, and the picture cut out—the laptop being disconnected—just as a scream of pure terror tore into the microphone.

The screen went black.

Vince leaned back on the couch. "Holy hell..."

The picture returned to a grim-faced Bradley. "The whereabouts of Martin Wallace are currently unknown, and the Chinese government refuses to discuss the matter. A spokesman for the Pentagon also declined to comment when questioned as to whether the relocation of officials and their families and the news blackout in Hong Kong are indications that President Zemin may be contemplating the use of China's nuclear arsenal."

The image changed to a montage of file footage and computer animations of satellites orbiting the Earth. "When we return," Bradley said in a voiceover. "Satellite Shutdown: what caused the communications breakdown that has so paralyzed the globe and made America the target for blame? We'll talk to Dr Clayton Forrester of Pasadena's Jet Propulsion Laboratory about the possible causes—"

Vince shut off the television and dropped the remote on the couch. He didn't know what to make of any of it. All this finger-pointing and talk about nukes, reporters getting their asses kicked by soldiers. It was just an equipment malfunction, for Pete's sake! So the satellites weren't working properly? Send up a space shuttle or one of those Russian things and have somebody fix them. What was everybody getting so bent out of shape about?

On the other hand, though, he had to admit to being concerned. Without cable TV, there was no Playboy Channel or Spice Channel and he was paying for those, whether there was a signal or not! So, okay, it did affect him directly, but he figured he could hang on for a few days before he started to go into porn withdrawal. Just long enough, hopefully, for the problem to be solved. The world just needed to chill out for a while. It wasn't like civilization was going to collapse because some sheik in Saudi Arabia couldn't pick up *Baywatch* reruns on the giant satellite dishes he'd had built out in the desert.

Vince tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He couldn't waste his time worrying about all that crap. He had bills to pay, and finding a way to pay them was all he could be concerned about right now. He opened his eyes and gazed across the coffee table at last Sunday's newspaper; within its pages were "help wanted" ads, but he hadn't bothered really looking at them since he'd bought it. Well, maybe it was time to do just that.

Right after he finished his coffee.

He picked up the mug and took a sip, then grimaced. It was cold. With a sigh, he returned it to the table, glanced at the newspaper again and stood up. Maybe he'd go visit Speed first, bring him up to date on yesterday's events. He wouldn't be able to offer anything more than a sympathetic ear, but the way Vince was feeling, maybe that was all he was looking for from his old buddy.

And then he'd check the want ads as soon as he got back home. Scout's honor.

He smiled broadly, pleased with his plans for the day. If nothing else, a few beers and a rap session with Speed would do wonders for making him feel better about dumping that bitch.

Lea never really did get to sleep after she got home. Oh, she tried, but between the pounding she'd had to watch Vince take and the odd couple that had stopped her on the street, it was difficult for her to close her eyes. Her body was tired, but there were too many thoughts

and worries running around in her head to let her drift off to sleep for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time.

Around ten am—about the time Vince was snoring peacefully in his bed instead of beside it—she got up and shuffled to the kitchen for a cup of decaffeinated mint tea. Usually, it helped her to relax, but she doubted she'd be nodding off anytime soon.

Cup in hand, she went back to her bedroom, which, during waking hours, doubled as her living room. The wonders of beds that folded away into couches. Her apartment was a three-room sardine can (not counting the bathroom), of which the third should have been proper sleeping quarters. But about three years ago, in a fit of inspiration that lasted exactly two weeks in October, Lea had converted it into an artist's studio, complete with paints, easel, canvasses, and a determination to get *some* kind of painting done.

Well, the coat of lavender she'd applied to the walls certainly made the room look pretty, but that was as far as she ever got. Now, the oils had long since dried, the easel was coated with a thick layer of dust and the canvasses had gone out with the garbage when she'd flung them out the window on collection day. Pretty much the only reason she still went into the room was to choose outfits from the massive walk-in closet.

Lea flopped down onto the bed and dug out the remote from under the sheets. From the next apartment, she could hear Mrs Galvez watching *Divorce Court*. The old woman was somewhat deaf, so she tended to blast the volume, rather than do something sensible like get a hearing aid. It normally didn't bother Lea, because once she fell asleep, she was dead to the world. Now, though, it was maddeningly annoying, especially since the man and woman getting divorced were yelling so loudly at each other.

She flicked on the TV to find a message from the cable company informing customers about the loss of access to their system due to satellite problems. "Thought they would've fixed that by now," she mumbled testily. Channel-surfing didn't bring her to anything of interest. It was all meaningless talk shows with interchangeable hosts of the same boring caliber, or game shows that all seemed the same, or soap operas with overly dramatic actors who all looked

alike. It was the perfect kind of drivel her mom would watch for endless hours while the minutes of her life ticked away. Eventually, she landed on *Divorce Court* and got to hear the litigants in stereo, when combined with the blaring volume of the television next door.

Lea dropped the remote in frustration. Maybe she could take one more shot at falling asleep. She rolled over on her side and her gaze fell on the handbag that sat on the coffee table. The plastic case of that DVD those people had given her was sticking up from the top, as though waiting for her to retrieve it. She stared at it for a few seconds, then shrugged. "What the hell."

She rolled out of bed, grabbed the case and popped it open, then carried the disk to the DVD player. Once she dropped it in and closed the tray, it started running immediately. There was a burst of static followed by an image of a television studio. It was set up as a talk show set, with a large desk, an interviewer's chair (one of those ergonomic seats like office supply companies carried) and a couch for guests. The kind of layout one would expect to find in an infomercial. All it needed was a host to start things off.

He appeared out of nowhere, popping into the seat as if by magic, or a quick editing cut that had been made to the video. A cheap and lame attempt to surprise her. You'd think people who dressed as well as they did could afford better visual effects, she thought. She stepped back to sit on the edge of the bed.

He was good-looking, in the same Brad Pitt/Orlando Bloom kind of way as Michael, except this guy had sandy hair and light-brown eyes. He sat straight in his chair—his mother must have been a stickler for good posture—with his hands folded in front of him on the desk. The dark suit he wore looked like an Armani, with a red power tie that completed the look. His smile was pure spotlight, teeth so perfectly white and Hollywood gleaming that Lea had to wonder if they were caps.

"Hello, Lea," he said. "My name is Thomas." His voice was deep and evenly modulated, nothing like the shotgun delivery of the infomercial huckster she'd been expecting. "No doubt you're probably wondering what's been going on lately, why my friends have been so busy talking to people in your area."

Actually, she hadn't been wondering at all. She'd heard talk among the regulars at the Terminal about encounters with some "religious nuts" who were floating around the neighborhood, but she hadn't paid it all that much attention. If the two representatives she had met were part of a large organization, she hadn't really noticed. Working the hours she did, sleeping during the day like a vampire, rising in the early evening for her shift (rinse, then repeat), she had thankfully managed to avoid any encounters with them until this morning. And if they had shown up at her door several times over the past few days, as Muriel had said, then she'd probably slept right through their bell ringing and door knocking.

"It's because we're..." Thomas grinned and shrugged, as though embarrassed by what he had to say. "We're on a mission of sorts."

"To lower prices and save me money," Lea muttered sarcastically.

"I know it sounds corny," Thomas continued, "but we've dedicated ourselves to helping others. There are a lot of people in the world who have never realized their full potential. People who've never truly lived their lives. They've only trudged through them, allowing the years to slip past until it comes time to, as they say, shuffle off this mortal coil." He paused for a moment, his movie-star looks shifting to a somber, pained expression. "People like you, Lea."

She recoiled, as though he'd physically slapped her. Then her lips pulled back in a snarl. "You sanctimonious son of a bitch!" she yelled.

Thomas nodded, like he could hear her, then he unfolded his hands and turned them palms up. "I know, I know. It's hard to hear someone you've never met criticize the way you live. If I were in your position, I'd be outraged."

"You're damn right," Lea snapped. "But I can do something about that." She picked up the remote and aimed it at the DVD player.

"It got your attention, though, didn't it?" Thomas smiled slyly and winked. It took Lea by surprise, and she hesitated, thumb poised over the power button. "I'm sorry about that. It's not the sort of approach our organization really cares for. It tends to make people too angry to listen to what I have to say." He shrugged. "It's just that I've always been a firm believer in what you'd call 'tough love.' I get right to the heart of the matter, so we can deal with it openly."

"Must make you real popular with the other recruiters," Lea said.

"But then, you've always been like that yourself, haven't you?" Thomas asked. "You're not the type to beat around the bush. 'Don't try to b.s. me, just give me the facts, right?'" He nodded, clearly agreeing with his assessment. "I'd even bet that, at this very moment, you're deciding whether or not to turn off this DVD and throw it away because I'm taking too long to get to the point."

Lea looked down at the remote, and realized her thumb was still hovering over the power button. She raised an eyebrow and smiled lopsidedly. "Good call, handsome."

"Before you do anything hasty, though, just give me a few more moments of your time. We have someone waiting backstage with a very special message for you." Thomas smiled warmly. "I really think you'd like to hear it, Lea." He looked to his right, and nodded. "Sister Claire?"

There was no musical fanfare from any off-screen house band, no smattering of applause from a hidden audience, just a slow camera pan to the left as someone entered the stage from the wings. She was an attractive woman in her late twenties, with a pale complexion and high cheekbones; fiery, shoulder-length tresses flowed behind her like a boat's wake, sweeping and spilling over the shoulders of her dark, tailored jacket. There was something familiar about her, but Lea couldn't quite put her finger on what exactly it was. Maybe it had to do with the two of them having similar builds and hair color. They could have almost passed for sisters.

Sister Claire nodded politely to Thomas as he rose to gesture her toward the guest couch. She took a seat, carefully adjusting the hem of her black miniskirt, and crossed her legs. Once settled in, she turned to the camera and folded her hands around her knee as she leaned forward, like a storyteller about to spin a tale of wonder. A warm, inviting smile, powerful enough to send a pleasant chill up Lea's spine, lit up her face and made her light-green eyes twinkle.

"Hello, sunbird," she said softly.

Lea's jaw dropped open at the same time the remote hit the floor, broke apart, and bounced under the bed.

Sunbird. It was a nickname from her childhood, one she hadn't heard in over a decade. It had been a joking reference to the way the sunlight had played off her hair early one morning when she was six years old, making it look like her head was aflame. And only one person had ever called her that.

"N-Nana Claire?" Lea stammered.

Now she realized why the woman looked so familiar, why they could have been mistaken for sisters: family resemblance will do that, after all. She remembered the black-and-white pictures she used to see in the old photo albums her mom kept, of the beautiful, self-assured woman with the easy smile and the quick wit who, years later, single-handedly kept a family together after her husband died of a sudden heart attack. The same woman who used to bake sugar cookies for her and read her bedtime stories when she came to visit, and called her "sunbird" as a sign of the deepest affection she felt for her favorite granddaughter.

The same woman who died late into her sixties, over ten years ago.

The same woman who, impossibly, insanely, was addressing her right this very minute.

"I realize it might be... difficult for you to accept this, baby," Sister Claire continued, "but it's me. Really me."

It was a trick of some kind, a cruel attempt to take advantage of the love she'd had for Nana before the cancer took her away. Lea ground her teeth and closed her eyes, trying to fight back the tears that were already burning tracks down her cheeks. They'd certainly done their homework on her, hadn't they? Dug up all the dirt they could find, pulled out the biggest shock tactics they could devise to get her attention, all in the cause of what? Proving to her she was one of the "chosen," whoever the hell they were?

She pounded a fist against the bed's mattress. "Bastards!" she muttered.

It made her angry, made her want to pull the TV from its electrical socket and smash it against a wall. Instead, she looked around for the remote through bleary eyes, ignoring what the woman on the screen was saying to her. She wiped the tears away with the back of a shaky hand, focusing her gaze on anything but the television.

"—how I used to read to you every night when your mother and father would bring you out to the house for a weekend visit?" Sister Claire asked.

"Not listening," Lea said through clenched teeth. She leaned forward, running a hand under the bed to locate the remote. "Not listening... not listening..."

"You enjoyed *Charlotte's Web* so much, even though the ending made you cry. I always thought it would give you nightmares, but you proved me wrong every time."

Her fingers made contact with the plastic casing and Lea snatched up the remote, only to discover that the batteries had dropped out when it hit the floor. "Damn it!" she hissed. She got down on her knees and stuck her head beneath the bed, hoping for a glint of sunlight against metal to show her where the alkaline cylinders had rolled.

"Do you remember what you used to say to me about Charlotte dying? 'Don't worry, Nana. Charlotte went to heaven—'"

"But she can still keep an eye on her babies." Lea and Claire said in unison.

Lea froze, her body suddenly feeling like it had gone numb. A tremor ran through her limbs, equaled only by the one that had seized her lips, and now she found it hard to breathe. She'd never said that about Charlotte to anyone else, not in her whole life; she hadn't even read any E B White since her grandmother had passed away. There was no way for someone to find out what they'd discussed more than twenty years ago; it was a special conversation between two people who cared for one another with the sort of unconditional love, the sort of emotional bond, that only a child and a doting grandparent can share.

Slowly, Lea raised her head to stare into the eyes of the woman on the screen, the woman who looked so much like her, the woman she'd never stopped missing, all these years later, and she knew. As impossible, as insane as it might be, this *was* her Nana Claire.

And then the tears came freely as she reached out to stroke the cheek of the loving, smiling image on the television screen, knowing her world would never be the same.

EIGHT

It took some effort to twist his stiffened, tortured body into a position that would allow him to gain access to the Camaro, but Vince finally managed to fold himself into the driver's seat. Now the problem was how he was going to lever himself back out when he got to Speed's house.

"Yeah, well, I'll just burn that bridge when I come to it," he told himself. He keyed the ignition and closed the door, relying on the rearview mirror more than he usually did to see where he was going as he backed out of the driveway. If his neck muscles didn't ache so much—probably caused by sleeping on the floor last night, because he didn't recall Gordo landing any punches on the back of his skull—he would have just stuck his head out his window and looked around. At least he hadn't seen any kids playing in the street as he'd hobbled to the car; if there *were* any, well, they'd better just get the hell out of the way.

He didn't hear any terrified screams, or roll over any unexpected bumps in the road as he swung the Camaro onto the asphalt, so he figured he was safe from any further increases to his already overwhelming insurance rates. "And they're off!" He tromped down on the accelerator and burned a little rubber as he prepared to peel out. He caught sight of Mrs Ramirez, glaring at him from across the street. She didn't care much for him and was often vocal enough to let him know it. Like any other day of the week (or weekend, for that matter), she was decked out in a tracksuit that had never seen a day of actual use on a track of any kind. The fact that she had a body like a refugee from a *Free Willie* movie ("She's not just fat, man, she's Orca-fat," he once told Speed) probably had a lot to do with that.

Climbing the four steps up to her house usually knocked the wind out of her; wind sprints would kill her for sure. Between the powder-blue outfit and the numerous rings she wore on her thick fingers, she looked less like a suburban housewife and more like a middle-aged casualty of the East Coast/West Coast rap wars or a member of the Mafia. But with her hair done up in curlers and strips of aluminum

foil like some techno-version of Medusa (something women did when they were coloring their hair, Lea had explained to him at some point in their relationship), it was doubtful any of those groups would ever admit to counting her among the rank-and-file.

"Afternoon, Mrs Ramirez!" Vince called, waving good-naturedly. "How's that low-carb diet workin' out?"

She flipped him the bird as he rocketed past.

It only took a few minutes to get where he was going, the bass line of the Camaro's shoddy muffler clearing the streets of children and small animals. But as he turned the corner onto Speed's block, Vince couldn't help but wish he had left the house sooner.

There was Speed, sitting on his porch as usual, a beer in one hand. But standing right in front of him, talking to the ex-biker as though he was an old friend, were Michael and Muriel.

"No freakin' way," Vince muttered in astonishment. He was so surprised by the realization that Speed hadn't already broken the beer bottle on Mr GQ's head that he took his foot off the gas pedal and the Camaro coasted to a halt.

He didn't know what to make of the situation. Hadn't Speed just told him yesterday how he thought that religious bull they were peddling was just a bunch of crap? Then what the hell was *this* all about? You'd think those two had been old buddies of his in that motorcycle gang he used to run with, considering the way they were talking and laughing. Vince could maybe understand why Speed would put up with Muriel for awhile—she was real easy on the eyes with those killer legs and all—but Michael should've been lying in a bloody heap less than a minute after his foot touched down on the porch.

And then it got even worse. As Vince watched through the dusty, dead fly-speckled windshield of his car, Speed gestured for the Beautiful People to go inside the house and then he followed them!

"No freakin' way," Vince repeated. He angrily gripped the steering wheel until the blood drained from his fingers. Something was going

on here, something that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand straight up. He didn't know what it was—maybe they'd brainwashed Speed with all that religious doubletalk, maybe they were setting him up for a robbery—but he'd had his fill of those two and was in no mood to let them try and take advantage of his best friend.

He stepped from the car, closed the door, and walked back to the trunk, from which he retrieved a tire iron. He hefted the metal bar in his hands for a moment, testing its weight, then slammed the trunk shut and walked quickly toward the house. Before he realized it, he was running, tearing up the block at full speed, the makeshift weapon held tightly in his right hand.

Vince raced up the path to the front door, leapt up the short steps to the porch and was caught in a burst of light so brilliant it seemed as though the sun had come crashing down on the house.

He fell back, landing in a heap at the bottom of the steps, spiking the pain-meter in every one of his aching muscles past overload. The tire iron flew from his hand and clattered across the driveway.

For a few seconds, it was hard to see, even harder to breathe. The impact had knocked the air from his lungs, and each inhalation caused his back to spasm, which, in turn, filled his vision with spiraling black spots that were slow to fade. Eventually, though, he was able to sit up, then stand, not completely upright, however. Staying doubled-over and holding his ribs in place until the pain subsided seemed the best position to be in as he once more mounted the steps, this time on shaky legs.

It didn't appear to have been an explosion. Not a conventional one, anyway. The house was still standing and Vince was pretty sure he would have been incinerated the moment the blast caught him. Not that there was even a "blast" to speak of; nothing had struck him. He'd simply lost his balance and fallen backward out of surprise.

He paused at the front door and looked back. Speed's neighbors were coming out of their homes, obviously to see what was going on. And yet, for all their curiosity, none of them were following him up to the house. Curious but scared, Vince thought. So what the hell is *my* excuse for being stupid enough to go in?

From way back in the distance, he could hear sirens. Probably someone had called the cops. He considered waiting for them to arrive—why go in alone, when he had no idea just what it was he was stepping into—but then immediately ruled it out. He'd come this far to help his buddy; he wasn't about to chicken out now.

"Speed!" he called out. "You okay in there?"

No answer. Either Speed couldn't hear him, or...

"Speed?" Vince repeated. "*Speed?*"

He looked back at the neighbors. They hadn't budged an inch from where they'd stopped. Just a bunch of flesh-toned lawn jockeys standing around mutely, waiting for something to happen.

"Damn it!" Vince muttered. It would have been a big help if just *one* of those wall-eyed boobs had worked up the nerve to join him. So much for that glowingly warm sense of "community" people always mentioned on the evening news when they talked about their neighborhoods. He steeled himself, then grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and pushed the door open.

Nothing.

"Speed?" he called out, a little louder this time. "You in there, buddy? It's me, Vince." He rolled his eyes and groaned softly, knowing how stupid that sounded. Of course Speed would know who it was by the voice but it seemed like something he should say before walking in.

Old habits die hard, as Mom would have said.

He strode through the doorway before he could think of any more reasons to hesitate and before his subconscious could offer any further useless commentary.

The main hallway looked the same as always. A little messy, but still presentable, its carpet clean but flattened by the tires of Speed's wheelchair, the small table where he dropped his mail a mite dusty. There was no sign of scorch marks from the flash. Vince crept forward slowly, leaning out so his head took the lead, the better to see around corners. He glanced toward the stairs leading to the second floor, then shook his head. No way was he going to find Speed there, unless Michael and Muriel had dragged him up the steps. He

paused to consider that option, then elected to do a sweep of the first floor before investigating the possibility.

Reaching the living room, he cautiously peered around the entrance to take a look inside, but saw no one there.

"Speed?" he said. "Buddy?"

Still no answer, unless he counted the tiny crackle of static he now realized was coming from the television. Speed had obviously left it on, but it wasn't tuned to any particular station. That usually meant he'd been watching one of the tapes from his porn library and hadn't gotten around to rewinding it.

Vince stepped into the room, wishing he'd stopped to retrieve the tire iron from the driveway. If the Beautiful People jumped him, he'd be in no condition to fight them hand-to-hand. Not after the way Gordo had manhandled him last night.

But the only thing he found waiting for him was an empty wheelchair.

Vince blinked in confusion. "What the hell?"

He made a quick circuit of the room, just to make sure Speed wasn't lying on the floor behind the couch, then walked out and headed for the bedroom. But when that turned out to be just as clear of occupants, he circled back and went to the kitchen. No sign of Speed or his guests could be found there, either and the deadbolt on the back door was locked from the inside.

That left the second floor, and he vaulted up the staircase two steps at a time. The rooms up there were relatively tidy—a nurse's aide came in once a week to check on Speed and do a little cleaning to keep the house in shape—but unoccupied.

"So, where the hell could they just disappear to?" Vince murmured.

He walked back downstairs and into the living room. Scratching his head, completely stymied, he looked around for any clues that might tell him where the trio could have gone. But he wasn't Sherlock Holmes or Magnum PI, or even Matlock. Detective stuff wasn't exactly his strong suit (hell, he had problems just trying to balance a checkbook) and he wouldn't know a clue if it walked right up and kicked him in the sack.

That opinion started to change when he saw the scorch mark that stretched across the front wall of the living room.

He hadn't noticed it the first time he came in—Speed's empty wheelchair had wholly captured his attention—but now that he was facing the streetside part of the house, it sure was hard to miss. It was black and jagged, like the shadow of a lightning bolt that had been etched into the plaster; thin wisps of smoke drifted up from its edges.

Okay, so at least there was some physical evidence of what had happened. But as to what that might have been, what the scorch mark signified, well, Vince couldn't even begin to form an opinion.

The hiss of static once more drew his gaze to the television. He stepped toward the power button at the base of the set, intending to turn it off, but then he caught sight of the unmarked, plastic VHS case lying on the carpet in front of it.

A queasy sensation roiled his stomach's contents, and he grimaced at the sudden taste of bile that soured his tongue. "Aw, hell!" he muttered.

He picked up the case, turned it around in his hands. Speed had mentioned getting one of those personalized gifts from Michael and Muriel, but then denied looking at it. Maybe he'd been hiding the truth from Vince, or maybe he got bored and curiosity got the better of him. Whatever the circumstances, it sort of explained why he'd been so willing to invite the well-dressed crusaders into his home.

Vince dropped the case and tapped the "REWIND" button on the VCR; after a few seconds, he punched "PLAY". The image on the screen was that of a good-looking redhead sitting at a desk. Vince recognized her immediately. It was the one he'd seen working the cab drivers when he was on his way to Doyle Lipton's place, the one Muriel had called "Sister Claire." Now that he got a good look at her, he was surprised by how much she reminded him of Lea. They could have passed for sisters, but he knew Lea was an only child. As he watched her wipe away tears—she'd obviously been crying for some reason—he couldn't help but wonder if he might've had a better relationship with this one instead.

"How and the why don't really matter," she was saying. It was a repeat of the same speech he'd heard on the DVD given to him by Muriel. "What does is that *we*, my friends and I, know how special you really are. That's why you've been contacted." She smiled, a little too broadly, eyes sparkling from the tears. "That's why you've been Chosen."

The screen went blank.

A tremor of fear ran through Vince as he stared at the television. He thought Michael and Muriel and their whole group were just a bunch of crackpots: Bible-thumpers with a jones on for trying to recruit new members to their organization. Carrying out their task in some weird kind of pledge drive, like the ones you see on public television, except they were collecting souls to save, not money. Annoying? Sure. Complete pains in the ass? Absolutely.

But getting cozy with Speed Moorcock like they were old pals, when he'd been so opposed to even talking to them the other day? Setting off explosions that burned walls but didn't blow up the whole house? Disappearing a guy without walking out a door, and leaving his wheelchair behind?

He had no idea what to think. All of a sudden, the damn world just didn't seem to make a lick of sense anymore.

The police showed up a few minutes later. Guns. drawn, they searched the house from basement to top floor, but there was no sign of Speed or his two visitors. When they were finally satisfied there was nobody skulking in a closet or a cabinet who needed shooting, they holstered their weapons and returned their attention to Vince. Some of them recognized him on sight: a guy with a DUI record as extensive as his tended to become familiar to patrolmen. Most, though, didn't know him from a hole in the wall; they just wanted to know what he was doing in the middle of a crime scene.

"I'm tellin' ya, Speed couldn't have gone anywhere without his chair," Vince insisted, explaining the particulars of his story for what

seemed the twentieth time that hour. "The guy can't even walk, for cripes' sake!"

"Then where could he be, Mr Hansen?" asked a terse voice from behind him.

Vince turned around. The appearance of the man standing a couple of feet away screamed "government" from the top of his widow's peak to the polish on his shoes. He had the kind of non-nonsense demeanor that reminded Vince of Sgt Joe Friday, Jack Webb's character on those old *Dragnet* reruns he used to watch on *Nick at Night*. It probably came as an extra with the suit this guy was wearing.

"Beats the hell outta me," Vince replied. He looked the newcomer up and down one more time. "Who're you?"

The Fed reached inside his jacket, to pull a small, thin leather case from the inner pocket. He flipped it open to reveal a gold badge and a government-issued ID. The expression in the tiny photograph was just as dour and Jack Webb-like as the one he was wearing right now. "Special Agent Richard Schultz, Homeland Security." He snapped the case shut, slipped it back in its pocket.

"Since when the hell does Homeland Security care about an ex-biker disappearing?" Vince asked. "Aren't you guys supposed to be hunting for terrorists or something?"

Schultz ignored the question, instead turning to the cops and forensics people. "If I could have everyone step outside, please?"

"Why?" Vince demanded. "What's goin' on?"

The Fed placed a hand on Vince's shoulder and applied just enough pressure to let him know he should shut his mouth. Wincing, Vince nodded quickly to show he got the message. Schultz gestured toward the front door. "Right this way, Mr Hansen."

The deathgrip relaxed once they reached the street. Schultz withdrew his hand, but that didn't mean Vince's shoulder felt any better.

As he rubbed the circulation back into his numbed arm, Vince gazed around at the buzz of activity that surrounded him. The block was filled with unmarked vans and cars, their occupants a mixture of soldiers, federal agents like Schultz and what looked like a forensics

team, although the latter group didn't look anywhere as hip and cool as the actors who played their type on TV. In fact, some of them looked more like dorks straight out of the lab. The police had moved Speed's neighbors to the far end of the street and set up barricades to keep them out, but it was clear that Schultz and his army of black suits were the ones in charge here.

Vince was bumped aside as a trio of people wearing bright yellow Hazardous Material suits came barging past. They all carried bulky pieces of equipment, the purposes of which were way beyond his understanding.

"Do you know if Mr Moorcock had any visitors lately?" Schultz asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Vince said. "I was just telling the cops that. Michael and Muriel, at least that's what they call themselves. Some kind of religious nuts."

"Were you visited by them as well?"

"I think they hit the whole neighborhood," Vince replied. He started windmilling his arm, feeling pins and needles in his limb as the blood started flowing again. "And there are more of them out there, too."

That was the comment that finally cracked Schultz's stoic expression. "You've seen others? Where?"

"I don't know," Vince said. He swept his arms out, in a gesture meant to encompass the area. "Around!"

"Rich!" a woman yelled in a muted voice.

Vince and Schultz turned to see one of the HazMat people coming out of the house. As she approached, she removed the bulky hood that covered her head to reveal the features of a black woman in her forties. She tucked the hood under her right arm and held up a large, clear plastic bag that she carried in her left hand. Inside was the videotape addressed to Speed. "Look familiar?" she asked.

Schultz's frown deepened, making it appear as though the muscles in his face were about to buckle under the strain. "Too damn familiar," he admitted. "Just like Burgess."

She handed him the evidence bag. "Jack and Parker are taking scrapings of that burn mark on the living room wall. We'll send them

off to Washington for analysis, but for the life of me I can't figure out what sort of explosive could've done that without leveling the house." She turned to Vince. "You saw the flash?"

"Point blank range," he replied.

"Oh," Schultz said, like he'd just remembered something. He waved at the woman. "Mr Hansen, this is Agent Fletcher, also of Homeland Security. Aisha, this is Vince Hansen. He's a friend of the missing Mr Moorcock."

Vince shook her hand. "How's it goin'?"

"Can you describe the flash?" Fletcher asked.

"It was like the ones you see in movies, when there's an atom bomb going off? But I didn't feel any... What's it called?"

"A shock wave?" she offered.

Vince nodded. "Yeah, that's it. No shock wave. It was just a big burst of light."

Fletcher and Schultz exchanged worried looks; then she shrugged. "Can't tell you anything without an analysis first, Rich."

Schultz nodded. "All right. But make sure the lab boys in Washington put a rush on this."

A thought suddenly occurred to Vince. "Hey, does any of this have to do with that screw-up with the satellites?"

Schultz eyed him suspiciously. "What do you know about that?"

"Only that I'm not gettin' all the damn cable stations I'm payin' for," Vince replied tersely. "Is anybody gonna fix the damn things?"

"Not our department Mr Hansen," the agent snapped. He glanced at Fletcher.

"I'll see how the others are doing," she said, and nodded at Vince. "Nice to meet you, Mr Hansen."

"You, too," he replied.

She covered her head with the Haz-Mat hood, then turned and walked back to Speed's house.

"So, who are these people?" Vince demanded of Schultz. "What would they want with a guy like Speed?"

"Mr Hansen, I say this with the utmost seriousness." Yeah, like the guy knows any other way to speak, Vince thought. "I'd be extremely careful who I let into my home, if I were you."

That took Vince by surprise. "What're you saying? They're maybe planning to disappear me, too?"

Schultz paused, eyes narrowing in thought as he stared at the bagged videotape. "There's a pattern forming."

"Wait a minute," Vince said. "You're saying Speed wasn't the first? There were others? How many?"

Schultz reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a business card. He handed it to Vince. "Call me if you see Michael or Muriel or any of their friends, all right?"

Vince glanced at the card, then back to the Fed. "That's it? You tell me to watch out 'cause they might be coming after *me* next, and then you want me to give you a call when they show up at my door? What the hell good is *that* supposed to do me?"

"It's an ongoing investigation, Mr Hansen—"

"Yeah, and I'm the guy you're gonna be investigating next!" Vince barked. He waved the business card in the Fed's face. "This is the best you can do?"

"The Department of Homeland Security appreciates your vigilance in these difficult times, Mr Hansen," Schultz replied, apparently feeling the question had already been asked and answered. Now he was tossing out standard government b.s. statements to get past it. "And we hope you'll continue to help your country in the days and months ahead by *remaining* vigilant." He pointed to the card. "You have my number."

And with that, he turned on his heel and walked back toward the house.

"Hey, just tell me one thing," Vince called after him. "Between you and me... we talking alien abductions here?" What the hell, he figured, maybe the Raggedy Man on that street corner was on to something.

Schultz didn't even bother turning around or slowing his gait. "We'll be in touch, Mr Hansen. Have a pleasant evening."

Vince snarled and flipped the card into the gutter.

"Bite me," he muttered, and walked away. If the government wasn't going to do a damn thing to help him, he'd just have to take matters into his own hands.

NINE

"Doyle, I need to borrow your shotgun."

It wasn't exactly what Vince had rehearsed as he drove to Lipton's wood shop. He'd meant to ease it into the conversation he'd intended to start once he got there, but just the idea that he had to borrow from a guy who'd yanked a job away from him yesterday made his blood boil. Better to get right to the point and get the hell out before he felt the urge to squeeze Lipton's acne-pocked face until the pus flowed like greasy lava from his clogged pores.

The direct approach certainly took Lipton by surprise. "Huh? I thought you had a thing about guns."

Vince held out his hand, opening and closing it in a "gimme" gesture. "Just hand it over, Doyle. I need it."

Lipton eyed him carefully. "What the hell do you need a gun for?" he asked slowly.

"Look, I really don't have to time to explain."

"Well, you better make some damn good time to explain," Lipton interjected. "I'm not handing over a gun to the first guy who walks in here and asks for it. You think I want to go to jail because I let you borrow it so you could blow somebody's head off?" He turned his attention to a point in space, speaking like there was a person standing in front of him. "Did I bother to ask Vince what he wanted my shotgun for, officer? Well, no, actually, but he was always such a trustworthy guy I didn't think I needed to." He scratched his jaw, and frowned. "Three people dead, huh? Jeez, wish I'd seen that coming." He shrugged. "You know, he didn't seem. to fit one of those profiles you hear about on the news. He wasn't what you'd call one of those 'quiet' types."

"Oh, for God's sake," Vince snapped. "I'm not gonna blow anybody's head off, Doyle. I just wanna use it for protection."

Lipton gazed at him suspiciously. "Who do you need protection from?"

Vince paused. No matter how he said it, it was going to come out sounding crazy, but he had no choice. If he was next on the list, as

Schultz had warned him... "You remember Speed Moorcock?"

Lipton nodded. "The guy in the wheelchair. Got a mouth on him as big as his gut. What about him?"

"What if I told you a couple of aliens vaporized him this afternoon?"

Lipton cocked his head to one side; looking confused. "What aliens? You mean, like Mexicans or something like that? Illegals?"

Vince shook his head. "No, no." He pointed toward the ceiling. "I mean *alien* aliens, like from outer space."

"Ohh, those kind of aliens." Lipton flashed a sarcastic grin. "I'd say it's about time somebody did."

Vince sneered. "I'm serious, Doyle. I was at his house when it happened. The Feds think I might be—"

"Feds?" Lipton said. "You're mixed up with federal agents?"

"Yeah. Homeland Security." Vince pointed back over his shoulder with his thumb, in the general direction of Speed's place. "They're over there right now, trying to figure out what the hell happened."

Lipton quietly studied him for a few moments, like he was trying to figure something out. Then he raised an eyebrow; the "you're full of crap" look on his face spoke volumes.

"I'm serious, Doyle," Vince repeated, although the tone of his voice came out sounding like he wasn't so certain of it himself.

"So, a UFO came down out of a clear blue sky and snatched up your friend. Why?" Lipton asked. "He the type of guy who goes in for those anal probes they talk about in those documentaries?"

Vince actually surprised himself when he realized he hadn't already jumped over the desk to kick in Lipton's teeth. Funny how cool a guy can stay when he's desperate, he thought. Self-control. Lea might have been impressed by this show of it. If he'd learned how to master it under different circumstances, months ago.

"No, he's not," he said through gritted teeth. "And it wasn't a UFO or any kind of spaceship that 'snatched him up.'" He gestured toward the front of the shop. "Haven't any of those Jesus Freaks been knockin' on your door these past few days?"

"Yes, I've seen them around. I told them to take a hike," he pointed to the shotgun, resting comfortably on its wall mounting, "or Lucille

here was going to put them on the express elevator to the Pearly Gates. I haven't heard anybody thumping a Bible near here since then." Lipton grinned. "Are you going to tell me now *Jesus* came and took your biker friend up to heaven? What happened to the deathray and the aliens 'vaporizing' him?"

"They're the same things," Vince explained.

Lipton's laugh was like the yelp of a wounded Rottweiler. "Oh, so God is really from outer space, huh? One of those 'ancient astronauts' the *Enquirer* used to run articles about back in the Seventies? And these religious nuts wandering around the area, bothering people, are... what? His invasion force?" He shrugged. "They sure have a strange way of trying to take over the world, Vince. You'd think they'd have figured out before they got here that they'd be more successful going after folks with rayguns in their hands than the Good Book."

"I don't know *what* they are, Doyle," Vince admitted. "Aliens, missionaries, hi-tech con artists running some kind of scam about Judgment Day coming. It doesn't matter. All I know is that the Fed I talked to thinks they might be coming after *me* next, and I need some kind of equalizer." He pointed at the weapon. "Can I *please* borrow your gun? Just for a couple of days. I'll take good care of it."

He hadn't meant for that pleading tone to creep into his voice. It reminded him of that frustrating conversation he'd had with the nasally bitch from the credit card company, what seemed ages ago. But it seemed to work on Lipton. The wood shop owner regarded him silently for what felt like a couple of minutes; Vince could almost hear the gears turning in his head as he tried to make sense of what he'd just been told before he made his decision.

"All right," Lipton finally said. "But I expect to have it returned in the same condition in which was lent."

"No problem," Vince assured him.

Lipton slowly rose from his chair and released the weapon from its mounting. He handed it to Vince, who cracked open the breechblock to inspect the barrels. Both were empty.

"Shells?" Vince said.

"Man wants everything," Lipton commented. He opened a right-hand drawer on his desk and pulled out a box of Remington twelve-gauge STS Target Loads. Not the typical sort of ammunition one would use in defending oneself from attackers, but at close range, a one-ounce shot moving at 1,185 feet-per-second (a velocity Lipton had once mentioned during their skeet-shooting trips) would sure as hell stop somebody dead in their tracks. Literally.

Vince took two shells out of the box and shook them next to his ear; the sound of small metal pellets rattling around in the plastic casing was like the rumble of thunder from an approaching storm. He jammed the shells into the barrels and snapped the breech shut.

"I owe you," he said to Lipton. He scooped up the box of shells and stuck them in the pocket of his leather jacket.

"If you kill somebody with that thing, I'm going to tell the police you broke in here and stole it," the shop owner replied.

Vince nodded grimly. "Yeah, well, let's hope it doesn't come to that."

He wrapped the shotgun in an old blanket he also borrowed from Lipton, so he could carry it without drawing attention, then tossed it in the trunk when he got back to the car. When he'd managed to ease himself into the driver's seat without his aching back flaring up again, Vince sat quietly for a few minutes and stared into space, door still open, left foot resting on the curb.

Okay, he thought, so I got the gun without any hassles but now what? Barricade myself inside the house and wait to see if the Beautiful People show up to take me away? Yeah, I could do that. I've got a bunch of two-by-fours and stuff like that in the basement, some wooden crates I could take apart if I needed to. There are cans of Spam in one of the cabinets, bunch'a other canned stuff in the kitchen. Couple cases of bottled water in the hall closet, portable generator down in the basement, too.

He found his lips curling up in a wry smile. Lea had thought he was nuts for stocking up on supplies like that; said it made them look

like some kind of whacked-out survivalists getting ready for World War III. But after the major blackout they'd experienced last summer, when it had taken almost four days for the power company to get their generators back up to speed, he'd explained he was never again getting stuck with a fridge full of spoiling food, warm beer and melting ice cream. She hadn't argued the point after that. The outage had cost her a half-gallon of lite mint chocolate chip.

Vince's eyes widened. "Lea," he whispered.

He slapped himself in the forehead. What a completely self-absorbed jackass he was! Here he was, sitting around worrying about the boogeymen coming for him, but who was to say they wouldn't go after his favorite girl first? Sorta working their way up the ladder, from Speed to Lea, before setting their sights on him.

"Yeah, big man?" he muttered. "And what makes you so damn special?"

To be completely honest about it, he hadn't a freakin' clue, it was just the impression he'd gotten from how hard Michael and Muriel had tried to work him during their encounters. But maybe they were like that with everybody they annoyed the crap out of; they sure seemed to have found a way to break Speed down in a short amount of time by talking his ear off. Maybe Vince Hansen was just another name on their list of potential new members, except he'd been playing so damned hard-to-get from the moment they first crossed paths that they'd taken it as a personal challenge to their abilities as recruiters.

But after what he'd seen this afternoon, maybe they'd decided enough was enough, and the time had come to cross off Vince Hansen and his friends from their list. Permanently.

He couldn't take any chances. He had to get to Lea right away.

He pulled in his foot, slammed the door shut, and keyed the ignition. The Camaro peeled out of its parking spot and tore down Vitus Place like the hounds of hell were chasing after it.

Time was running out for him, Vince could feel it. And all he could do was save what he could, and hope that his piece of the world would be able to survive the coming hours.

The Camaro fishtailed when he swung it into the Terminal's block, the trunk almost trying to race him down the street as he turned the corner. But Vince fought against the spin, struggled to keep control of the steering wheel and was ultimately rewarded with a sickeningly green Mini-Cooper being the sole victim of the Camaro's back bumper.

He stomped on the brake as he pulled up in front of the Terminal then vaulted out, leaving the door open and the engine running. He didn't plan on staying long. All his plan called for was grabbing Lea and heading for shelter. And if she tried to give him an argument, well, he didn't have time for crap like that right now. She was getting in the car one way or another, even if he had to drag her by the ankle and throw her in the trunk.

Well, maybe not the trunk; not with the shotgun in there. She'd just use it to blow his head off when he went to let her out, and the last thing he needed to hear as his brains coated the sidewalk was the sound of Doyle Lipton's voice saying I told you so.

And if Gordo was gonna give him trouble...

He paused in front of the building and looked back at the car. He hadn't thought about that possibility while he was driving here, but now that he focused on what he was doing, the odds were real good that he'd be walking into another confrontation. Maybe he should take the gun with him, he considered, just in case Gordo was in the mood to beat some more sense into him.

No. He didn't need to add second-degree murder to his list of sins, and Vince knew that's how events would turn out if he and the thuggish bartender got into it again. Better to take his chances on convincing Gordo that he was doing the right thing by Lea, and hope he still had full use of his limbs by the time the discussion was over.

He grabbed the polished brass door handle, steeled himself for the inevitable, and opened the door.

The place was empty. Well, not entirely empty: Lea was sitting at the bar, watching the television. Still, it took Vince by surprise. Happy Hour should have been in full swing by now, the tables

crowded. with patrons looking to fill up on booze and Lea's famous buffalo wings. To find the Terminal so church-like quiet in the early evening, when he shouldn't have been able to hear himself think over the roar of conversation, was... disturbing.

Allison Bradley was on the television screen. She didn't look quite so pretty now, with deep worry-lines etched on her face and a trace of fear evident in her eyes. Vince rubbed his jaw. What the hell had been happening in the time since he left the house this afternoon?

"We're just receiving information," Bradley said, "that the latest round of talks being held at the United Nations have broken down. Some analysts are predicting—"

The TV clicked off and Vince looked down to find Lea facing him. She was wearing one of those flowery summer dresses her mother had given her last year, although he couldn't remember a time when she'd ever worn it. He *did* recall her hanging it up in the back of the closet in her apartment, but she'd never worn it for him. Now that he saw her in it, he wished he'd convinced her to at least try it on once. It hugged her curves in all the right places and really showed off her legs. She'd done something with her hair, too, and she was wearing makeup; maybe she'd paid a visit to the beauty parlor on her way to work.

No, that didn't sound right. She wasn't made up for a night of hauling drinks and frying chicken in an alcoholic's dream-cave. She looked like she was going out somewhere. That queasy taste he'd had at Speed's place sloshed its way back into his mouth. It was impossible, he told himself. She couldn't really have dumped him for that jarhead Gordo could she?

He shook his head. It didn't matter if she was seeing Gordo or not. What was important was that he get Lea out of here before Michael and Muriel showed up to zap her, too.

"Hello, Vince," she said evenly.

"Look, Lea," he said, walking toward her, "I didn't come to make any trouble. I just wanna warn you—"

She stifled him with a kiss before he'd even registered she'd stood up. It was long and deep, and took him so completely off-guard his

brain didn't even get around to telling him he should be enjoying it until she let him go.

"Uh... wow," he finally managed to say. "What was that about?"

"I've been trying to call you," she said.

"I wasn't home." He gently pulled away from her, a stupid move, he knew, considering the days he'd spent pining to have her back like this, but he had to get out what he'd come to say. "Look, there's something you need to know. I'm not really sure how, but I think we're all in danger..." His voice trailed off as he looked around again. "Hey, where's Gordo?"

"He... took the night off." Lea nodded toward the door. "Didn't you see the sign? We're closed."

"At seven o'clock?" It didn't sound right, but at least that jackass Marine didn't seem to have anything going with Lea, if he'd left her alone in the bar. Vince shook his head. Stay focused, he told himself. "Look, you don't know what's been going on around the city. People are disappearing—"

Lea sighed. "Oh, Vince!"

"No, it's true," he insisted, and placed a hand on her arm. "You have to come home with me right now. We'll lock ourselves in. I think there's enough food in the house for us to wait this out for a week or so, just until the cops and the Feds get things back under control. And if anyone we don't know shows up—"

She gently pulled her arm away. "Vince, can I please say something?"

Great, here it comes, he thought. He'd moved too fast, acted too bossy, and instead of convincing her he was trying to help, he'd just gone and pissed her off again by getting all grabby.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him.

His brain was able to recognize that sensation immediately, but he still found it difficult to figure out why, exactly, she was getting so touchy-feely all of a sudden. Where was this show of compassion when he was getting his ribs kicked in last night? Why hadn't she come over to the house to see if he was all right, if she was attracted to him again?

"I feel so much love for you right now," she said, her face pressed against his chest. She gave another affectionate squeeze.

"Yeah? Me, too." This was all getting too damn confusing for him. Sure, he remembered how wild her mood swings used to get when they were living together, but this was taking things to a whole other level. She was the one who broke off the relationship. Now she wanted to get back together like nothing had happened? He kept waiting for her to knee him in the groin.

She sighed contentedly. "I just want us to be together forever."

He awkwardly hugged her back, still expecting the other shoe to drop at any second. "We will be. And I'll do better, I promise."

She looked up at him. "You mean that?"

There was such a wide-eyed, child-like expression of hope lighting her face he couldn't help but smile. "You know I do, baby," he assured her. "I just want to make you happy."

She pulled his head down to kiss him, then rubbed the tip of her nose against his. That was another surprise. She hadn't done that cutesy Eskimo stuff since they'd first started sleeping together.

"You *can* make me happy, Vince. You will." She snuggled against him again. "Know how you can do that?"

A wolfish grin curled the corners of his mouth. "Oh, I've got a pretty good ide—"

"You can start by watching the DVD."

Vince froze. "What... DVD?" he said slowly.

Lea tilted her head back to look him in the eye. There was something familiar about the smile she gave him now. "You know—the one Michael and Muriel gave you," she replied.

Now he realized where he'd seen that smile before. It was the same kind he'd seen plastered on Speed's face when he was inviting those two crusaders into his house. The same Sunday-go-to-meetin', the-Lord-is-my-shepherd grin he wore just before the flash hit that took the three of them who-knew-where.

Vince's knees suddenly felt weak. "Oh, no... no..." he muttered. "Not you, too..." He pulled away from Lea, who looked confused by his reaction.

"Vince?" she said.

"Lea, listen to me—" he began

She gently placed the tip of her index finger against his lips. "Sshh," she whispered. "I know it's all happening a little too fast for you, but there's no need to be frightened, Vince." That weird smile affixed itself to her face again. "Don't you understand? We've been Chosen."

He jumped back, suddenly afraid that maybe whatever had changed her so much, so quickly, might be able to get passed along to him by contact. "We... we can still get away," he croaked. His windpipe felt like it had closed to the size of a pinhole.

Lea smiled and shook her head. "Don't be silly, Vince. Running away from this isn't going to do either of us any good." She held out her hand. "Come on. I'm supposed to take you to them. They're waiting for us."

"Why?" he snapped. "So they can do to us what they did to Speed?"

She stepped forward, hand still held out for him to take it. "Come with me, Vince, while there's still time."

"No," he whispered, backing away.

Now the old Lea reasserted herself. "You want to be with me, Vince, don't you?" she barked. "We can still be together. Isn't that what you always wanted? She took another step, and the welcoming hand reconfigured into an accusatory finger that pointed straight at him. "Or are you going to screw this up like everything else you've ever done in your life? Are you willing to throw away a second chance because you won't listen to the people who want to help you?" Tears forming in her eyes, she pressed her hands to her chest. "Are you willing to throw *me* away?"

It was all too much for Vince. He'd come here to rescue the one part of—the one person in—his life who'd ever meant anything to him, and she'd been taken away from him before he'd even gotten a chance to make things right between them.

It wasn't fair. It just wasn't goddamned fair!

Why did *he* have to play the patsy for the whole universe? Why did *he* have to be the loser all the damned time? What did *he* ever do to God that meant he should always be the one getting punished, should always be the one getting the short end of the freakin' stick?

Enough was enough. If those Jesus Freaks or spacemen or whatever the hell they were wanted Vince Hansen, they were gonna have to come and get him. And they were gonna be in for one hell of a fight.

"I... I love you, Lea," he said softly, and moved toward the door.

Her eyes widened, and now the tears *did* come. "Baby?"

And then Vince Hansen did something he never thought he'd be able to bring himself to do, not in a hundred years. Not to the woman he just now realized was the one great love of his misbegotten life. But then, she wasn't his anymore, was she? He'd lost his last piece of the world; there was nothing left for him to call his own.

He turned his back on her and ran.

Her sobs still echoed in his thoughts as the Camaro peeled away from the bar and rocketed down the street.

TEN

He couldn't ever remember feeling this euphoric without being halfway through a bottle of tequila. And for Speed Moorcock, that was saying a lot.

When he put his mind to it, as he sat in a room that overlooked the sprawling gardens outside, comfortably nestled into a cushy leather armchair next to the lone window, he couldn't really say what exactly had prompted him to welcome Michael and Muriel with open arms when they showed up back at the house. Maybe the message on that videotape he'd watched had gotten through his thick skull. Maybe he just wanted an opportunity to see the rack on that redhead, Sister Claire, at close range. Or maybe he'd finally taken into account what a total screw-up his life had been—not a waste, since he'd had some great times, but forty-some-odd years that really could've been spent better—and decided it was time to pull his head out of his ass before the last bus rolled out of Loserville and left him sitting on the curb.

Not a real bus, of course, but he hadn't been able to come up with a way to accurately describe how his visitors were able to get the three of them from his house to... wherever this place was, in just the blink of an eye. One second they'd been talking in the living room; the next, they had jumped to the gardens outside and he hadn't felt a thing. It was like one of those David Copperfield magic tricks he'd seen on TV once years ago, where the guy disappeared the Statue of Liberty and then brought it right back like nothing happened. Or maybe it was more like that transport-thing on *Star Trek* that used to put Bill Shatner and Spock down on a planet and then yank 'em back up to the ship at the end of the episode.

Yeah, he thought. That was *just* what it was like. Speed grinned. "Well, beam me up, Scotty!"

After they'd arrived, Michael and Muriel had given him the nickel tour of the place, or as much of it as they were "allowed" to show, they'd said. They started with the meticulously maintained gardens, which appeared to stretch to the horizon without a patch of crabgrass or dandelions in sight. There were intricate patterns to be seen

among the flowers and bushes and hedgerows, spirals of Marigold and blue Delphiniums, rays of silvery Lamb's Ear and purple wildflowers, cloud-like formations of half a dozen kinds of roses. And dotted here and there were beautifully rendered statues of stone, or marble, or even glass (or were those diamonds?) that lined the stone walkways rambling through the splendor.

Speed had been awed by the beauty of it all. "Is this Heaven?" he'd asked, barely able to get the words out.

"No," Michael said. "It's Iowa."

Speed had cut him a seriously confused look, then, and saw the smile that played at the corners of his host's mouth. "Hey, wait a minute. Isn't that from..."

Michael nodded. "*Field of Dreams*. It's one of my favorite movies." The smile widened, and he shrugged. "I'm sorry. Sometimes I can't help myself, when someone gives me such an absolutely perfect setup line like you just did."

Speed chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I did, at that."

It became a sort of turning point for him, realizing that maybe these people weren't all the holier-than-thou stiffes they appeared to be. Finding out they had a sense of humor finally broke the ice between them, and Speed started to relax as the tour continued.

They showed him the massive, futuristic-looking industrial park that Michael compared to the processing center on Ellis Island, through which thousands of immigrants had passed on their way to new lives in America. ("You know you're not the first person we've talked to, Eugene," he'd said. "Or even the first arrival.") They showed him the housing center where he'd be staying until final plans had been settled on for what sort of role Eugene Moorcock would be playing in the first stage of his second life. But when he started asking just a few too many questions about what he'd be doing, what's behind that door down a particular hallway, why he couldn't talk to any of the other "arrivals," the beatific smiles of his hosts started to waver.

"You'll have the opportunity to see everything, Eugene," Muriel promised. "There will plenty of time for you to see and do a lot of things, now that you've agreed to take that second chance."

And, oddly enough, he'd accepted her at her word and not pressed the issue further, even though she'd addressed him by that godawful first name that hung around his neck like the albatross in that old poem he'd tried—once—to read in his high school English class. Before he'd discovered Harleys. Before he'd dropped out.

Maybe he was starting to get used to hearing it, he reflected, not that he'd ever fully warm up to using it to introduce himself. Or maybe it was because whenever the women in this organization pronounced it, they said it in such a way that it didn't sound like a dork's name.

He'd dozed off after they brought him to "his" room. Muriel had said that fatigue was a normal reaction to the journey between points, and apologized for not bringing him here sooner, instead of tiring him even further with the tour. Speed had told her not to worry, he'd appreciated seeing the sights, and he was glad she'd been the one to show him around.

And he had been, he'd realized. Throwing her off his porch one day, thanking her for not giving up on him the next. The world sure was screwy, wasn't it?

A second chance, huh? A new lease on life they were offering, hopefully at a low interest rate. It would take a little doing, getting used to starting over, but long-term convicts he'd known in the joint felt the same way when they finally got back out in the world. Some were smart, and used their second chances to get themselves right; most, however, were back in stir before the ink had even dried on their release forms. At least Michael had explained he didn't have to give up *everything* he used to do; there were still good times to be had, although a bit more in moderation than what he'd become accustomed to. But that was all right. At this stage in his life, maybe a little moderation wasn't a bad thing.

The big toe on his left foot itched, and Speed idly bent forward to scratch it. With a contented sigh, he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sun through the window glass. He wasn't too wild about some of the preaching he'd been hearing since he got here, if for no other reason than it got incredibly

monotonous after awhile. Didn't anybody in this place follow sports, or even pro wrestli—

His breath caught in his throat, and his eyes popped open.

His big toe had itched.

His big toe had itched, and he'd scratched it like it didn't mean a damn thing. Like it was something he did every single day of the friggin' week.

But his big toe, or any other part of him South of the Border, with the exception of the one that mattered to the ladies, hadn't itched in years. Not since the accident. Not since he'd lost the use of—and sensation in—his legs. can't be

"Can't be right," he told himself. "That right. Must'a been one'a those phantom pains, like I used to get in the beginning."

But it wasn't. He *knew* it wasn't. There was a mild tingling beneath the skin, like blood circulating back. into an arm gone numb when you fell asleep on it. The muscles even felt stronger and if the passing years had caused his legs to atrophy, as he'd seen happen despite numerous physical therapy sessions, why, then, did the jeans hug them so tightly?

He had to find out for sure. Even if he wound up flat on his face, sprawled on the floor like he'd been on a three-day bender and forgotten he couldn't just get up and walk to the bathroom, he had to take the risk.

He started with the right leg, lifting it from the footrest and placing it squarely on the floor. He managed to keep from yelping when he actually felt his fingers digging into the inside part of his knee to gain purchase, but it sure took some effort. He couldn't remember the last time anything had startled him like that. The left leg came next, and then all that remained between Speed Moorcock and potential happiness (or crushing depression) was putting the strength of his arms to use. And taking that second chance.

He gripped the padded armrests with his hands and pushed down, hard, levering himself toward a standing position. It was slow going, like climbing a mountain with his legs mired in a cement-filled bucket. Sweat poured down his face, his hair and beard became matted and his clothes clung to him like a second skin. His arms

began trembling from the strain, but he wouldn't back down, wouldn't give up and simply plant his ass in the chair and call it a day.

Not without a fight, he promised himself. Not without knowing if what he thought had happened was true, as unlikely, as impossible as that seemed.

He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth and threw his weight forward with a howl of determination that forced its way from the depths of his soul, past his lips to fill the room. But he didn't fall.

Slowly, Speed opened his eyes and looked down.

"Oh... Oh, my God!" he whispered.

He was standing.

His laugh came out sounding strange, a tremulous guffaw wrapped around a sob. It only lasted for a second—he was too choked with emotion to utter anything else—but it seemed like the only thing that *could* have been said, given the situation.

He was standing. That was all he could think, all his mind could comprehend, no matter how illogical it was. The crippled didn't suddenly start walking again, he knew, the deaf didn't out of the blue tell people to turn down the noise, the blind didn't just wake up and comment on how beautiful the sunrise was and yet...

And yet, he was standing. Under his own power. On his own two legs.

"It's a miracle," he croaked.

"Some might call it that," said a gentle voice beside him.

He turned. Michael and Muriel stood just to his left, the sunlight through the window making their skin appear to glow. He hadn't noticed them before; they'd probably been watching his struggles from the doorway.

"We just think," Muriel continued, "that a person can't truly make good use of their second chance unless they're healed in both spirit and body."

Speed looked down at his legs again. Hesitantly, he made his brain order the right foot to move and it did, sliding forward a step; the left foot followed. In a few moments, he managed to turn himself completely so he could face his hosts. He felt a little wobbly, like a

young colt finding its center of balance, but that was to be expected. Gotta learn to walk before you can run, he told himself.

"Give it some time, Eugene," Muriel said. "You'll get used to it—" she smiled brightly "—again."

"W—who are you people?" Speed asked hesitantly. "What... what is this place?"

"We're your friends, Eugene," Michael said. He gestured around them, and his face practically lit up from the warm and gentle smile he gave to his guest. "And this? This is the place where dreams come true."

Another line from *Field of Dreams*, but he didn't bother pointing it out. Instead, he felt the unaccustomed burning in his eyes, the slickness of tears running down his cheeks, and smiled crookedly. Speed Moorcock would have thought it unmanly to be displaying so much emotion in front of a woman and another guy. It was a sign of weakness, and a man never showed his weaknesses, especially not to some chick, no matter how much of a looker she might be.

But Eugene Moorcock, the man who now stood on sturdy legs, seeing the world around him from a height he hadn't been able to scale in far too long? The man who now moved forward to embrace the well-dressed couple who shared his tears of joy and welcomed him like a long-lost brother returned to the family?

He'd never felt stronger, never felt more confident, never felt more hopeful and joyous and... and *loving* at any time in his entire life. And even greater things were to come. He knew that for certain now and couldn't wait to see what the future would bring.

"Praise Jesus!" he whispered hoarsely.

Having already finished barricading the front door, he was nailing planks across the windows when the first flash of light caught his attention.

It came from Mrs Ramirez's place. Vince found it kind of amusing, imagining the expression on Orca's face when the alien death-ray sliced into her blubber, ruining a perfectly good tracksuit.

He completed his work, then gave each of the planks a pull to test the strength of the nails holding them to the wall. They held just fine.

There was another flash of light from down the street, then three more in rapid succession.

"Jeez, it looks like they're grabbing just about *everybody*," Vince said huskily. He reached down to grip the stock of the shotgun that rested against the television. The feel of polished wood against his fingers brought an odd sort of comfort to him. "Sure wish I could've worked that molding job for Doyle."

Hesitantly, he glanced out through the window again. There were people coming down the street. A lot of people. And they were all heading toward his house.

"Oh, man," Vince muttered. "Now they're comin' after *me*."

He fought the urge to panic, to either run out the back door or start shooting out the window to take down as many of them as he could. Besides, the shotgun wasn't all that effective at a distance. Most of the pellets probably wouldn't even reach their intended targets. There had to be a third option, he assured himself, someone he could turn to for help.

That's when he remembered the business card, the one Agent Schultz had given him. *There* was his ace in the hole: Homeland Security to the rescue, like the friggin' cavalry in a John Wayne movie.

But he'd thrown the card away, hadn't he? Tossed it in the gutter outside Speed's house when Schultz gave him the brush-off.

Well, that'd sure as hell teach Schultz to go around acting so helpful to people the next time he felt like handing out his card, wouldn't it? Yeah, that'd teach him a *good* lesson.

Vince closed his eyes and banged his head against the wall. "Aww, shit!"

The doorbell rang.

"Mr Hansen?" said a familiar female voice. It was Muriel.

"Go away!" Vince bellowed, scrambling away from the window. "I've got a gun!"

"We just want to speak with you, Vince." Michael, now. "We only have a few minutes, and I think you really need to hear what we have

to say."

"What? And give you the chance to zap me, like you did to Speed?" Vince took up a position in the middle of the hallway, leveled the shotgun at the door, and cocked back both hammers. "Now, get the hell off my property! I mean it!"

Apparently, though, the threat of a loaded gun wasn't about to keep the Beautiful People from paying a visit to their reluctant host. Or a shuttered door, for that matter.

Vince's eyes almost popped out of his skull in disbelief as he watched the boards across the front door violently warp and shift, like an animal going through its death-throes. First one nail popped off and clattered to the floor, then the others followed. The boards landed on top of them, each sharp impact sounding like a rifle report. It made Vince jump with fright, and he wrapped his index finger around the dual triggers.

Then the dead-bolt lock began to turn on its own and the door swung open.

The Beautiful People paused for a moment on the threshold, all beatific smiles and perfect posture, then Michael stepped forward.

"Vince—" he began.

Whatever he meant to say was drowned out by the roar of a double-barreled shotgun being discharged directly into his chest. The blast smashed him off his feet and sent him hurtling back, far enough to clear the edge of the porch before savagely dropping him at the bottom of the steps.

For a few seconds, Vince couldn't hear a damn thing, his ears were ringing so badly. Not the brightest idea he'd ever had, firing a big, loud gun in the house like that, but it sure as hell had done the trick. Despite the momentary loss of hearing and the fact he'd just shot a man at close range without hesitation, he felt a hundred percent certain he'd done the right thing. A guy had to defend himself against intruders, right? What was he supposed to have done, wait for them to pull out their ray guns, or whatever the hell it was they'd used on Speed, and get the drop on him first?

He turned his attention now to Muriel, who had simply stepped aside as Michael came sailing out of the house on the Remington

Express. What was *she* going to do, he wondered?

But Muriel just stood there in the doorway, sadly shaking her head. Tears welled up in her eyes, but he couldn't really tell if she was shedding them for Michael or for him. "Oh, Vince!" she said in that disappointed tone of hers. "You shouldn't have done that."

"I warned him!" Vince barked. "I warned the *both* of you! But you wouldn't *listen*, would you?"

"*You're* the one who should have listened, Vince," she said cryptically. She turned on her heel and walked away.

Vince followed her out, reloading the shotgun with the cartridges in his jacket pocket as he stepped past the shattered door. If any of the other "brothers" or "sisters" he heard out in the street felt stupid enough to get froggy with him, he'd be more than happy to say "jump." Michael had certainly hopped a good distance down the porch steps before coming to rest in a heap.

But it wasn't a legion of Armani-suited Beautiful People he found standing around outside, staring at him in goggle-eyed horror. It was most of the neighborhood. They'd gathered in the middle of the street, young and old, male and female, apparently waiting to see what would happen next. But they looked different somehow, even that bovine harpy Mrs Ramirez from across the way, like they'd all gone through a kind of rejuvenation process that made them appear healthier, years younger, more at peace with themselves even.

Like they'd all been Chosen.

"Great," Vince muttered. "Just great." He started to ease back toward the house, waiting for the rush of fanatics he was sure would come at any second.

He scanned the crowd. Lea was with them, looking just as pretty and sad as the moment he'd left her. Of course. He should have expected it.

But it was the sight of the man beside her that caused Vince to drop the shotgun, that made him feel like his whole world had just turned completely upside-down.

Speed Moorcock. Standing on two good legs.

"No way," Vince whispered. "That's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible, Vince," Muriel replied. "Not when the Lord is involved." She gestured toward Michael's crumpled body.

And as Vince watched in shock, Michael's eyes slowly opened.

"That can't be," Vince croaked. "I hit him with both barrels. I *know* I did."

Michael unfolded his tangled arms and legs and stood up. He paused to brush dark specks off the front of his blazer; when they struck the ground and bounced with a small metallic sound, Vince realized they were the shotgun pellets. He looked back up, to see that the suit—and its wearer—bore no evidence of what should have been a killing blast.

Michael sighed, and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Vince. It's clear now you were never meant to be Chosen."

Vince tried to say something in response, but all his mouth did was flop open and closed, like he was a freakin' fish out of water, struggling to breathe. Finally, he managed to force out, "Jesus Christ, what *are* you people?"

Michael gazed at him for a moment, an amused smile highlighting his male model features like they'd just shared a private joke that Vince didn't understand. Then he turned to Muriel and nodded. Together, they removed their jackets to reveal the brilliantly white wings that grew from their backs.

Vince gasped and almost choked as the breath caught in his throat. He'd been all wrong about these two and the organization they worked for, right from the start. They weren't religious nuts or con men or even space aliens.

They were angels.

"No way," he said softly.

And then it finally dawned on him exactly what was happening. All that talk of second chances, of something that was in him worth saving, of wanting to save his soul, insisting that time was running out. It wasn't just a bunch of evangelical BS. It was all real, all true. The satellites had gotten screwed up for some reason maybe only God knew for sure and all the talk he'd been hearing on the TV made it clear the world's leaders were getting ready to go to war over it.

Suddenly all the snide comments he'd made about Judgment Day a'comin' didn't seem quite so smartassed.

But not everyone was going to have a front-row seat to the End Times, were they? The Chosen were the lucky ones, the folks being shuttled off to Paradise, just in time to miss out on the fireworks down here on the soon-to-be late, great planet Earth. And Michael and Muriel? They were the angels sent to escort this particular group to the afterlife. To that second chance.

They were taking everybody to heaven, he now realized. Everybody who'd really *listened* to their message.

But they weren't taking *him*.

Michael looked to Muriel. "We should go. There's not much time left, and the others will already be waiting for us."

Muriel nodded. She turned to gaze at Vince. "God be with you, Mr Hansen."

"What?" Vince replied sarcastically. "You can't see Him standin' right next to me?" He shrugged. "Or maybe He sent a stand-in. I'd guess the Big Man's a little too busy right now watchin' the world go to hell to give a damn about one poor schmoe among billions."

"He cares about *all* his children, you know," Muriel countered. "Even the prideful ones."

"Yeah?" Vince snapped. "Then why isn't He showing how much He cares about me right *now*?"

The disappointed look again. "That's a question only you can answer, Vince. God places *you* on the path. Whether you decide to walk it, or step from it to wander across the wilderness, is entirely up to you."

Vince smiled. "Real pretty words, sister. I'm sure they'll keep me all warm and fuzzy at night." He gazed past her, back to the crowd. There she was, just off the center. "Lea—" he began.

"Goodbye, Vince," she said tearfully. "I really *did* love you."

Speed gave him a half-hearted wave. "Sorry you won't be with us, man. You an' me, we could've raised some hell up there! Literally."

The group gathered together tightly as Michael and Muriel took positions at either end. Their wings grew larger, enveloping the

members of the Chosen until the tips of the feathers met in the center.

Vince shuffled forward. "Wait," he pleaded. "Don't leave me behind."

"I'm sorry, Vince," Michael said. "You had your opportunities. Now you must live with your choice."

"But I didn't know what you were talking about!" Vince yelled. "Why didn't you just come out and tell me? I would've listened to you then, if you'd only made some damn sense!"

"Goodbye, Vince," Muriel said somberly.

"You go to hell, you bastards!" he howled. He swept a hand at the crowd, their eyes full of pity for him. "Every last damn one of you, I hope you rot in hell!"

The wings became brighter and brighter, and Vince eventually had to shield his eyes and step back before the light blinded him. For just a second, as he turned his back on her for the last time, he thought he caught sight of Lea, and the weight of it all came slamming down on his shoulders: how much of a failure his life had been, how hard she'd tried to help him, to make a better man of him, how little he'd truly appreciated her, or really anyone else for that matter. It drove him to his knees, crushed his soul, drove a lance deep into his heart, and he couldn't keep the tears of regret—tears he'd never realized had been building in him for years—from falling.

"I'm sorry, Lea," he sobbed. "I'm so sorry... don't leave me..."

But there was no one left to hear him.

The whole damn world was out to destroy him, or so it had always seemed. Vince Hansen had come to that conclusion a long time ago, but never in his thirty-one years of existence had it seemed to be such an inarguable truth.

And as the air raid sirens whined and he watched the missile arc across the star-filled sky, headed for the middle of the city, he realized now that he had no one to blame but himself for all his misfortunes. No one else to point a finger at; no one else to accuse of

screwing up his life. The only obstacle that had ever kept Vince Hansen from becoming successful at anything was... Vince Hansen. And now that obstacle had even denied him the promise of Paradise.

"Ain't *this* a hell of a time to make a confession," he said bitterly.

And then the world dissolved in a flash of light so brilliant it seemed as though the sun had come crashing down.

Vince Hansen had a chance at salvation.

Unfortunately, he was unable to tell angels from aliens, and instead wound up just another cinder in an ash heap orbiting somewhere... in the Twilight Zone.

THE PLACEBO EFFECT

Based on the Teleplay written by Brent V. Friedman
Story by Rebecca Swanson

ONE

Dr Leslie Coburn has always treated eternal hypochondriac Harry Raditch with a placebo—a sugar pill. An imaginary cure for his imaginary illnesses.

But what will this young doctor do when her patient contracts a real disease? A disease found only in the Twilight Zone.

Harry Raditch had always possessed an active imagination, an *overactive* one, you might even say. He couldn't always control it and he certainly never fully understood how it worked its strange magic, but once he'd gotten an idea in his head, it was hard for him to let it go. He worked it around in his thoughts, then worked it around some more, gnawed on its edges and smoothed out its rough spots, giving a wisp of a notion substance and form until it practically sprung fully grown from his mind, as the Greek god Zeus had given birth to his daughter, Athena.

A misfit, folks used to call him when he was young. Always with his head in the clouds, always looking to the stars, always dreaming the big dreams. Just *how* big they might be... well, none of them could say.

But that's getting ahead of things.

As a boy growing up in Emerson, Illinois, Harry was the kind who read a lot of comics, watched a lot of television; his taste in books pretty much ran the gamut of genres from fantasy novels to Hardy Boys Mysteries. He'd never really hung out with the neighborhood kids—he was "too sensitive for roughhousing," his mother, Mary, used to tell people. That was only partly true. Yes, he was a skinny, gawky kid more cerebral than physical, the type usually picked last when teams were formed in physical education classes and the first to be eliminated in a game of dodgeball. But Harry was no different

from any other boy his age, accumulating his fair share of cuts and scrapes and broken bones. It was all a part of growing up, the teachers at his school assured Mary.

That wasn't good enough for her. If school officials weren't going to protect her boy's health, then she would have to do it herself. An admirable thing for a mother to do, under normal circumstances. Mary, however, took matters to the extreme, becoming so focused on her son's health that she began to see illnesses where none existed. The slightest cough, the tiniest indication of bloodshot eyes, and she was thumbing through the Readers Digest medical reference books she kept in the house, trying to determine which potentially fatal malady Harry might have picked up somewhere. (Of course, this all happened back in the days long before anyone had ever conceived of the internet, access to which would have opened an entire world of infectious diseases to inspire Mary's imagination.) It was all a part of being a vigilant parent, she would tell folks.

But in the opinions of those to whom she was doing the telling, she was as bad as any quack doctor practicing without a license, putting wrong ideas in her son's head. It wasn't that he *never* became sick—there had been a particularly scary bout of tuberculosis he'd gone through when he was eight—but he rarely ever got a cold or the flu as he grew older, and everyone knew it. Everyone with the exception of Mary, it seemed. Watching her son practically cough his lungs up from the TB only reinforced her beliefs and bolstered her resolve to protect her baby boy from contracting any of the illnesses of the world.

And Harry believed her. Mary Raditch was his mother, after all, and if she said he was sickly; that he had to be careful of cuts and scrapes and the deadly consequences of infection; that he showed all the symptoms of scarlet fever, or rickets, or the mumps, all within a three-month period, then he followed her advice to the letter. The fact that she was a nurse at Cedar Grove Hospital added credence to her fears about her only child's health. She was around sick people all day, so who would know better about diseases than her?

The doctors Mary dragged him around to see felt much differently. In those days, the term "Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome" wasn't all

that widely known among the members of the medical community, especially not in a place the size of Emerson. The idea of a mother fabricating sickness in her child as a means to gain attention or sympathy for herself was fairly unheard of. To learn that Harry was the unwitting victim of such a psychological disorder would have horrified the Raditches' neighbors, right before they tarred and feathered Mary and ran her out of town. And yet, even though the physicians of Emerson weren't mental health experts, they knew *something* was wrong with this boisterous woman who always insisted that her son should be hospitalized for diseases for which they could find no symptoms. They just weren't able to do much about the situation.

They were never got the chance to examine her because she refused to see a psychiatric expert, even at the insistence of her supervisors at the hospital. And since her actions at home never seemed to influence the manner in which she handled her hospital duties, she couldn't be accused of posing a risk to the patients under her care. Besides, she'd tell them, there was nothing wrong with her; if they really wanted to help, they'd do all they could for her poor son instead of bothering her with nonsense. "He's so fragile, so susceptible to infection," she'd say. "I'm only doing what any concerned mother would do for her child."

And so they acquiesced and treated her son as she asked... just not quite in the way she thought.

The concept of the placebo—a Latin word meaning "I shall please"—was introduced in the late eighteenth century by doctors attempting to treat certain patients on a psychological level, rather than on a pharmacological one. Often, these individuals weren't physically ill, as laboratory tests often confirmed, but they would nevertheless insist they were suffering the symptoms of whichever ailment they believed had befallen them. By providing a "cure," whether through the use of sugar pills given as "real" medication, or by performing minor surgeries meant to convince these people that they were undergoing far more complicated operations, the goal of the doctors was to convince the recipients that they were once more healthy and robust. The resulting condition. became known as the

"placebo effect," a phenomenon whereby the patient's strong belief that such procedures will cure them does indeed cause them to succeed.

So it was with Harry and his own doctors as the cycle of psychological abuse continued, from child to teenager, with neither son nor mother the wiser. Yet with each passing year, Mary instilled in Harry such a fearful dread of all things viral that he began poring through volume after volume of medical reference books and journals on his own. It sounded like a good plan: he needed to study his enemies, learn their methods, educate himself on their ways of attacking a healthy body. But it only served to scare the living hell out of him.

Now he was seeing germs everywhere, worried that each time he breathed in he was inviting an army of infection to establish a beachhead in his sinuses. Touching a doorknob could allow streptococcus to ooze through his pores. And sitting on a public toilet? It made him sick to his stomach just thinking about it.

He contracted his first imagined illness by the time he turned fifteen. Something small to start with, to get his feet wet, as it were. Sinusitis, it was, and he insisted the inflammation that pressed against his skull was damn near killing him. There was no proof of that, of course, and all the test results came back negative. But that did nothing to convince Harry he was mistaken; in his opinion, the doctors were hiding the truth so as not to worry him about the severity of his condition.

It no doubt made his mother proud to see how her son turned out under her careful tutelage. As he grew older, Harry became as hopelessly neurotic a hypochondriac as she could ever have dreamed he would, except she never got to enjoy the fruits of her extremely strange behavior. Getting killed by accidentally stepping in front of a delivery truck on her way to work one morning was the one true ailment she suffered in her adult life that no doctor could cure with a sugar pill.

But a frightening obsession with all things infectious wasn't all Mary Raditch cultivated in her son before her untimely passing. She'd also been a firm believer that a child should have a healthy

imagination to go along with a healthy body. Although, of course, her boy would never know the enjoyments of the latter, what with his proclivity for getting sick as often as he did.

That didn't stop her from encouraging him where she could. Harry was an avid reader, especially seeing as it was one of the few activities in which he was allowed to indulge during his "convalescent" periods. Mary always made certain he had plenty of material on hand, stacked high on the nightstand right next to his bed. He tore through newspapers and magazines, historical accounts and travel guides, discovering the wonders of a world outside his door he would probably never get to explore, from the towering heights of the Himalayas to the crushing depths of the Marianas Trench. At school, his textbooks presented him with true-life tales about presidents and dictators, great battles and greater peacemakers, philosophers and warriors, skilled mathematicians and inquisitive scientists.

And when he tired of reading about the real world, he turned his attention to novels and short story collections, comic books and picture books. There were lands in those to explore as well—Narnia and Oz, Neverland and Barsoom, Gotham City and Krypton, Shangri-La and King Solomon's Mines, Whoville and Arkham—but they only existed on the printed page and in the imaginations of their creators and readers. Or at least that was the general perception. Harry Raditch, though, saw things in an entirely different way.

The Event (as he later referred to it whenever he thought back to that day) happened shortly after his tenth birthday. That was the year he discovered he possessed a talent he'd never known he had, a special ability all his own that neither of his parents had ever warned him might one day manifest. Of course, they never knew about it. Lord only knows what Mary would have made of *that*. How he was able to do what he did mattered little to Harry. He was a kid, after all, and the fun was in the trick, not in the logic of trying to figure out the steps that made it possible.

He'd been lying in bed, deeply engrossed in reading his spine-cracked, well-worn hardcover copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, its pages severely dogeared from all the times he'd bent down the top corners instead of using a bookmark. He had just reached the part where Dorothy and her friends the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion have been dispatched by the Wizard to destroy the dreaded Wicked Witch of the West. Along the way, they're attacked by creatures that have been instructed by the Witch to kill her would-be hunters: first crows, then bees, then finally the odd-looking but dangerous Winged Monkeys. The crows and bees fail, but the Monkeys tear apart the Scarecrow, whose straw stuffing is scattered across the ground. The Woodman is carried into the air and flown miles away, where he is dropped on rocky terrain in an attempt to break him apart. And the Lion is bound with ropes and flown to the Witch's castle, where she plans to make him a beast of burden. Then the Monkeys turn their attention to Dorothy and her little dog, Toto.

Harry knew what would happen next—he'd read the book so often he could almost recite whole passages—but still he felt a rush of anxiety as he imagined the fear the characters must feel as they see the Monkeys dropping from the sky to snatch at them. *He* would certainly be afraid were he in their place. The thought of flea-ridden animals scratching and clawing and biting him, trying to kill him, filled the boy with dread. What would that be like, he couldn't help but wonder, to encounter such strange and frightening creatures?

A rush of wind swept through the room, almost tearing the book from his grasp. Harry stopped reading and turned his head toward the windows. It couldn't be a breeze from outside the house, he realized, because the windows were closed. Another gust battered him from the far side of the room, accompanied this time by the sound of wings flapping. He lowered the book and gazed in the direction of the disturbance.

There was a monkey watching him.

That was pretty unusual to begin with. Of course the Raditches had never owned a monkey. "Who knows what sort of diseases those dirty little beasts might possess?" his mother would have said if he'd

asked for one. And Harry didn't remember hearing any reports about one escaping from a zoo or a circus. But what made the situation *really* bizarre was that it wasn't just any old chimpanzee or rhesus crouched on the top of the desk that stood near the door of his room. This one wore a red cap trimmed with gold braiding and a pair of dark-feathered wings jutted out from between its shoulder blades, extending a few feet on either side.

It was a Winged Monkey, straight out of L. Frank Baum. The *King of the Winged Monkeys*, in fact: the officer's cap that signified his station was a dead giveaway.

Harry cocked his head to one side and greeted his strange visitor with a smile. "Hello, Your Majesty," he said, trying to sound respectful, while keeping the tone of his voice neutral so as not to frighten the creature. "Where did *you* come from?"

Well, from Oz, no doubt. More than likely from the nightmarish castle belonging to the Wicked Witch, to be more specific. Not that the little winged beast seemed about to answer him. It just stood mutely on the desk, closely watching the boy from beneath the bill of its cap. Still, Harry had to admit, it wasn't as though he'd expected to receive an answer; the Monkeys in the novel might have been able to converse with humans, but that didn't necessarily mean that this particular one was about to start saying anything useful. It was a monkey, after all, and primates generally didn't talk. Unless they were human, of course.

Harry sat up in bed, paused to bend down a page corner to mark his place in the book, then set the novel on the nightstand. Keeping his eyes on the monkey as it continued to keep its eyes on him, he eased his way off the comforter and put his feet on the floor.

The Monkey King screeched.

Harry tried to shush it, made gestures for it to be quiet, like putting his index finger to his lips and claspng both hands over his mouth, but although the monkey might be seeing, it certainly wasn't doing. It went right on chattering, flapping its wings for added effect. Pens and pencils, schoolbooks and assignment pads all went tumbling to the floor in the simian-generated windstorm.

"Harry Raditch!" his mother shouted from downstairs. "Whatever are you doing?"

"Uh... nothing, Ma!" he automatically called back, still waving his hands at the monkey to be silent. But it ignored him, its voice rising in pitch as it glared at him.

No, not at *him*. Harry suddenly realized it wasn't jabbering at its human host, but at something *behind* him.

Slowly, he turned around to look out through the window. He had a fairly disturbing idea of what he might find when he did so, but actually having it confirmed by his own eyes was still a shock.

There were more flying monkeys outside the house, dozens of them, in fact, careening about on their black wings, scaring the hell out of the neighbors. Some swooped down to grab at fleeing humans and pull them high into the air, others made dive-bombing-type runs at passing automobiles, causing the drivers to swerve out of the way and right into mailboxes, fire hydrants, lampposts and the occasional home. The windows of Harry's room vibrated under the aural bombardment of howls and screams—not all of them of nonhuman origin—crashes and blaring car horns. It was a scene of complete and utter chaos and Harry thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen, right up to the moment he heard glass breaking downstairs and his mother screaming.

It was obvious what had happened: the monkeys had broken into the house, probably looking to join up with their leader. Or maybe, in some strange way, they thought they might find Dorothy and Toto hiding somewhere inside. Whatever the reason, Harry knew they didn't belong in the real world, and they needed to return to wherever it was they'd come from, whether that was Oz or the pages of a hardcover novel. There were just two questions that needed to be answered first: how did the monkeys get here, and how was he going to convince them to go back?

From the first floor came the muffled sound of glasses and dishes shattering. Apparently, the monkeys had made their way into the dining room and were smashing his mother's good china and wine flutes, the stuff she only brought out for special occasions, like the

day when his father, Benjamin, had finally gotten a raise from his bosses at the automobile plant in Decatur.

"Get out of my home, you horrid disease-carriers!" Mary yelled, adding her shrill tones to those of the destructive intruders. Then she screamed in terror.

"Mom!" Harry leapt to his feet and headed for the door, but the Monkey King spread its wings to block his way, letting out a godawful howl.

A call to arms.

The windows suddenly shattered and monkeys poured into the room. They zeroed in on Harry, trying to grab him, trying to bite him. He fought them off and rolled under his bed for protection, thinking it ironic, even at his young age, that he was seeking safety from monsters in the very place he had long feared they lurked at night.

But the invaders from Oz were not to be denied. Fingers gripped the edges of the bed and lifted it a foot above the carpeted floor before tossing it aside. Sharp nails tore at his clothing, mottled feathers beat against him. He wrapped his arms around his head in a vain attempt to cover his face as the creatures closed in on him.

Now it was Harry's turn to cry out, and he was embarrassed by how high-pitched and girl-like his scream sounded. He sounded like Sandra Warren when Jackie Maguire had dressed up like a monster last Halloween and jumped out to scare her. A small part of him was grateful that what friends he possessed—those few his mother allowed into the house, as long as they didn't track dirt on the floors or spread their germs onto the furniture—weren't around to hear him shriek; they'd never allow him to live it down. The rest of him just wished, really, *really* desperately wished, that the nightmare would end and the monkeys would go away.

"Just go away!" he yelled.

And they did.

It took Harry a few moments to realize the chattering had stopped, that the sounds of destruction had come to an abrupt halt. Slowly, he uncovered his head and opened his eyes.

He was alone in the room.

It wasn't as though everything had gone back to the way it was before the madness started. The room was still a mess, the windows were still broken and his clothing was torn in a dozen places by sharp nails. But his attackers had vanished as mysteriously as they had arrived and that was all Harry cared about. He picked himself up and made his way to the window, taking care to avoid the shards of glass scattered across the carpet, then stared, wide-eyed, at the changes brought to the landscape.

"Wow!" he said quietly.

It was a shocking sight, all right, like gazing at the destruction caused by a hurricane after it's passed through the area. The Millers' house across the street was on fire, although whether the blaze was set by the monkeys or started accidentally by the family would be impossible to determine until order was restored. There were cars overturned on lawns, cars lying on their sides after encounters with fire hydrants, cars with their trunks sticking out of what used to be living rooms and sun parlors before their drivers had plowed into homes on both sides of the street. Off in the distance, the wail of sirens from approaching fire trucks and police cars sliced through the humid, smoke-thickened air, drowning out even the roar of flames and the moans of the injured.

Down on the lawn in front of the Raditches' domicile, Mr Doyle, the mailman, was on his hands and knees, retrieving the envelopes, magazines and packages that were strewn over the grass and connecting sidewalk. His blue uniform shirt and pants had been ripped to shreds, exposing a wide expanse of fish-white belly for all to see. Harry found it curious that a man who walked as often as Mr Doyle did on his postal rounds should be as fat as he was, especially in the summertime. Maybe he ate a lot to keep up his energy.

"Harry!" Mary screamed. He could hear her footsteps on the stairs as she made her way up to his room. "Harry! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Ma," he answered. "I'm fine."

Harry turned his back on the disorder outside his home and hurried to join his mother in the hallway, grateful that she was all right, knowing she'd probably have him tested for everything from rabies to head lice to make sure none of those "dirty beasts" had

spread any infectious diseases to her darling boy. But that was no problem for Harry. You could never be too careful about wild animals, after all, and who knew what kinds of viruses they had back in Oz?

"If a person really put his mind to it," his mother used to say, "why, he could change the whole world, I'd bet." It was a heady concept for a child to grasp, yet one brimming with possibilities. But Harry was an exceptionally intelligent boy for his age, and he'd always known Mary's comment was a figure of speech meant to inspire him, rather than a truism about the power of the human brain.

Still, in the days that followed The Event, as he replayed the moments leading up to it straight through its sudden ending over and over in his mind, he couldn't help but wonder if maybe there was more to his mother's little speech than just a string of inspirational words. Maybe a person really could change the world if they concentrated hard enough. A person like Harry Raditch, for example. The winged monkeys had to have come from somewhere and he had seemed to be the focal point for the disturbance. Why else would the King Monkey show up in *his* room in particular, just when he happened to be reading about the flying simians attacking Dorothy and her friends? Harry was only ten years old but he was aware of the possibilities of a power that seemed to be hidden deep in the recesses of his brain.

Maybe, he thought with a certain amount of excitement, he'd even become some kind of mutant, like the costumed heroes in the comic books he read. Mutants were always popping up in comics. Some were good and some were bad, some young and idealistic about how they could use their powers to help the world, others older and bitter and fanatically dedicated to the belief that their superpowered status made them mankind's masters. Harry never missed an issue of their exploits. To think he might have inexplicably become something like the Eyebeamer or Mentallus or the Bombastic Boll Weevil... well, that would be just the coolest thing ever.

He couldn't tell anyone, though. If there was one lesson he'd learned from his comic book reading, it was that revealing one's secret identity and hidden powers to another person usually ended with the hero's loved ones—a doting aunt, a girlfriend, maybe a wife—being placed in great danger by a member of his notorious Rogues Gallery. It was never kryptonite or magic or armies of attacking henchmen that ultimately proved to be a hero's undoing: it was the compassion he felt for those close to him. And Harry cared too much for his mother to ever put her in such a life-threatening situation.

And so he kept mum about what might have caused The Event, and never mentioned it again to his parents, who had never seemed to fully recover from the traumatic attack on their home. Mary ran from the living room every time the family watched talent shows on television and an act involving chimpanzees was introduced. *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* and the cartoon series *George of the Jungle* made Benjamin shift nervously in his easy chair whenever they were on. As for Harry, well, he had simply given up reading about the Land of Oz and found a new reading interest: science fiction.

There were so many worlds to explore in the pages of Heinlein and Bradbury, Asimov and van Vogt, Clarke and "Doc" Smith and a host of other authors. Planets and moons, galaxies and alternate dimensions full of wonder and excitement.

And dangers? Oh, yes, full of plenty of those as well. Dangers enough to spark any reader's imagination, especially the overactive ones.

TWO

There couldn't be a more perfect spring morning than this one: blue skies, not a cloud in sight, the air cool but not too cold, the first buds in the trees just starting to bloom.

As she pulled into the parking lot, the convertible's top down so she could enjoy the breeze, Leslie Coburn couldn't help but smile. After a particularly brutal winter of heavy snowfalls, arctic-like temperatures and almost perpetually cloudy skies, not to mention an infernal groundhog that apparently never experienced a day in the past five years when it didn't see its shadow, the city's rebirth was a long time coming. She'd be glad when she could put all her winter clothes back in storage and break out the full-on spring wardrobe.

Right now, though, she needed to focus on more important matters than whether her Marc Jacobs or Prada would still be in style when they came out of hibernation. There was work to do, patients to see, new challenges to meet, and she greeted them the same way she'd greeted this day when she first woke up: eagerly.

She maneuvered the convertible into her designated spot and cut the engine. A rush of exhilaration widened her smile as her gaze fell on the concrete bumper in front of the car and the fresh coat of black-painted letters on it: RESERVED FOR DR COBURN.

Dr Coburn. A title she was still getting used to, even four years after she'd graduated from medical school, although the student loans she was paying off on the first of each month were a constant reminder of the degree she'd worked so hard to earn. Well, she'd come to accept it over time. Mom and Dad had certainly warmed up to it fast enough.

Grabbing her knapsack from the back seat, Leslie stepped from the car and crossed the lot to enter the one-story brick-and-glass building that housed the offices of Marks Medical Associates. And she, happily enough, was one of those associates. The first in the family to become a physician and the first African-American member of the practice.

Family medicine had been the focus of her studies in school, although her parents had initially been concerned by the choice. Why become a general practitioner, they'd wondered, when there was so much money to be made as a surgeon, a sports doctor, or some other kind of specialist?

Leslie had simply explained that there were plenty of those in the world for patients to choose from already. Indeed, there were two sports doctors, a plastic surgeon, a heart specialist, and a neurosurgeon in Emerson alone and that was more than enough for any modest-sized city. But with the public concerns about the quality of health care in the United States—barely a week went by without some story about HMOs and the like appearing on the nightly news—she thought it important that families should have the best possible service available to them. And if Leslie Coburn had to be the one to provide it, so be it. She'd find some way, she'd wryly commented, to make do without the sprawling mansion on the outskirts of town or the chauffeur-driven limousine. Besides, it wasn't like she was making poverty-level wages. Family practice was lucrative enough in its own regard.

Dad had seen the logic of her argument and backed out of the debate; Mom, on the other hand, hadn't been able to hide her disappointment. She'd always hoped to see her little girl become Chief of Surgery at some Chicago hospital, with a staff of medical experts at her beck and call, like on that *ER* television show, not spend her days dealing with commonplace ailments like colds and flu, arthritis and broken bones, head lice and gas pain. But that was to be expected; parents, and especially mothers, always dreamed bigger than their children.

Leslie was proud of the work she did at MMA, proud of the close relationships she'd established with her patients, proud of the level of trust they'd shown her. Some of the senior citizens, like Gladys Horowitz, had been suspicious of her abilities in the beginning, not because of Leslie's race, but because of her age. For someone in their sixties or seventies, it was difficult to imagine a "pretty girl" in her mid-twenties being knowledgeable enough to competently treat a

patient almost three times older. More often than not, they acted like she was a nurse, not a doctor.

"That's all right, dear," Mrs Bacchus said to her during their first meeting in one of the examination rooms. "I'll just wait for the *real* doctor. Will you let me know when he's available?"

Yet somehow Leslie managed to smile through the insults and condescending remarks, and insist that a) she *was* the "real" doctor; b) she was more than capable of making diagnoses and had already familiarized herself with Mrs Bacchus's chart; and c) the discussion of this matter was over. And besides, as flattering as being referred to as a "pretty girl" might be for her ego, the fact that she was twenty-five at the time quite clearly identified her as a grown woman. What surprised her even more than finding herself capable of exhibiting such a firm attitude in the first place (she usually tried to avoid confrontations) was how taking such a stand actually earned her the respect of the seniors, instead of their ire. And she knew it could have been so easy for the response to have swung the other way, with her coming out of it labeled a rude, arrogant child who thought she was better than her older and far wiser patients.

But it had turned out all right in the end. Even Mrs Bacchus and Mrs Horowitz admired her "gumption" and said she reminded them of when they were her age. Leslie soon enough settled into the rhythm of her profession. With some extremely rare exceptions, she really enjoyed the time she got to spend with the patients, catching up with them during their visits every six or twelve months (barring illnesses that forced them to come in sooner), hearing how their families were doing, making sure they took their medication as prescribed. It truly made her feel like she was making a difference in their lives.

Well, not every life, she had to reluctantly admit. There was one patient in particular who turned every effort she made to help into an exercise in frustration. One patient whose visits every two or three weeks—sometimes weekly if he was really on a roll—scratched and scraped at the edges of her kindly soul like nails on a blackboard. A man whose annoyingly obvious calls for attention once made her consider picking up the phone and calling the staff at nearby Neufeld

Psychiatric Hospital to see if there was a room available. For her. A man who, every time he showed up in her office, made her want to scream: "NO! You can't make me!"

Leslie paused. She hadn't actually said that out loud, had she?

She looked around and realized with a start that she was standing in the reception area for the medical offices. Her mind had wandered so, she hadn't even been aware she'd entered the building.

She shook her head and smiled. Of course she couldn't have been the one who'd spoken aloud. She knew the sound of her own voice, and that high-pitched, childish shriek she'd heard wasn't anything close to it. So whose was it, then?

She gazed into the lavender-walled waiting room which was fairly empty at this hour, occupied by only a handful of people. Mornings were generally light as a rule; the real crowds wouldn't start showing up until around lunchtime. Gus Thorpe, one of Dr Gruber's regulars, lounged across two of the seats, reading the *Chicago Sun-Times*; an article headline just below the front page fold proclaimed "METEOR SHOWER TONIGHT KICKS OFF SKYWATCHING SEASON." In his sixties, one of the last of the farmers still living near Emerson, it was doubtful Gus was paying much attention to astronomy notices, not when the Cubs were in pursuit of another National League Central championship. Across from Gus, in a corner over by the windows in the front of the suite, sat an overweight Latin woman in her forties for whom the centralized air conditioning was apparently doing little good, based on the way she was fanning herself with a copy of *Ladies' Home Journal*. Perhaps, Leslie thought, she might not feel so hot if she'd just move to another seat that was out of the direct sunlight. A few rows ahead of the Latina was an African-American woman in her early thirties, her drawn features and bag-laden eyes making it clear she was completely exhausted, operating on sheer will power alone. The hyperactive eight year-old boy and seven year-old girl who chased one another around her, refusing to obey her plaintive requests to sit down and be quiet, were the source of her fatigue as Leslie knew well.

She stepped into the waiting room, trying to appear both friendly and professional. The children, spotting her immediately, stopped

their horseplay and took shelter behind their mother.

So, it's true what they say, she thought with a hint of malice. Doctors and clowns, the two kinds of people guaranteed to scare the absolute crap out of kids. Maybe I should wear face paints one day next week, just to see what kind of reaction combining the two would get.

Leslie took a seat in the row ahead of the woman. "Morning, Trina," she said.

Trina smiled weakly. "Morning, Dr Coburn."

Leslie nodded toward the children, both of whom took a frightened step backward, the better to limit the chances of falling into her clutches, no doubt. "Donny and Sheniqua here for their flu shots?"

Trina nodded. "Can't be takin' risks with they health these days, what with all them superbugs and the like goin' around, like I keep hearin' about on the news. Seems like there's always another one poppin' up nobody ever heard of almos' every day." She sighed and shook her head. "Always somethin' else y'gotta worry about for your kids, y'know?"

Leslie nodded sympathetically and patted her on the knee. "And how are you holding up?"

Trina drew in a deep breath, released it in a huff. "I'm just tired, is all. Got off work a couple hours ago; gotta start getting ready for the other job soon enough."

Leslie's eyes widened in surprise. "Trina, you *really* need to rest. You can't keep pushing yourself this hard. It's not good. Couldn't your mother have brought the children here while you got some sleep?"

Trina shook her head. "Momma's havin' one'a her bad days. Y'know, with the artificial hip. Some days she can't even get outta bed, the pain's so bad."

"Oh," Leslie said. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

Trina nodded. "Mrs Washington's takin' care'a her until I get back with the kids."

"Do you want me to stop by after hours and take a look at her?" Leslie asked. She raised a hand to cut off Trina before she could decline the offer. "It'd be no trouble. Really."

A ray of warmly glowing happiness cut through the gloom that darkened Trina's features, an expression that showed she appreciated Leslie's kindness more than she could put into words. She smiled brightly. "Thank you, Dr Coburn. That would be a godsend."

Leslie squeezed her hand consolingly and returned the smile. "I'll call ahead to let you know when I'm on my way." She stood up, rising to her full height as she eyed the children, who took another step back. "I'll see you two shortly. In the meantime," she gestured toward Trina, "cut your mom some slack, all right? She's doing her best to do right by you two. It wouldn't hurt to return the favor every once in awhile."

She looked past the children to Gus, who was giving her a Roger Ebert-like "thumbs up" sign, either because he liked her speech or because she seemed to have silenced the kids by putting the fear of God into them just by her very presence. With an appreciative nod of her head, she turned on her heel and exited the waiting room.

As she headed for the reception desk, Leslie made a slight detour over to the building directory. Egomaniacal as it might sound, she always got a thrill from seeing her name so proudly displayed under the heading for Marks Medical Associates. It reinforced the feeling that she'd truly made something of herself, even if her parents had rather been hoping to see her name listed under something more like *Coburn* Medical Associates. Well, give it enough time, Leslie had often told them, and who knows what the future will bring?

A small frown tugged at the corners of her mouth as she noticed that the press-on letter "n" at the end of her name was crooked. She took a moment to correct the problem, then stood back to admire her work, smile firmly back in place.

Once more at peace with the world, she finished her journey to the reception desk. Kathy Gardner, a portly woman in her forties with short brown hair and a multitude of metal studs and rings piercing the length of her left ear, smiled as she approached.

"Morning, Dr Coburn," she said brightly. She nodded toward the directory. "Take care of that spelling problem okay?"

Leslie blushed and looked away for a moment. "It's... fine now, Kathy. Thanks. What's on the schedule for today?"

Kathy glanced down at a large spiral-bound appointment book that lay on the desk in front of her. It was already open to the day's list of events. "Mrs Baylor's kids are here for their flu shots—" she glanced up at Leslie and nodded in Trina's direction "—but you know that already." She returned her gaze to the pencilled notes written next to specific times. "Jean and Bobby Haggard are coming in at eleven for a consultation." Again, she looked up. "No luck with them, huh?"

Leslie frowned. "No. They're both young and healthy, so I'm at a loss as to why they're having so much trouble conceiving a child." She shook her head. "I think it's time I referred them to an infertility specialist. Can you call Allison Sontag's office and ask about setting up an appointment for them, this week if possible?"

Kathy nodded and jotted a note on a large yellow Post-It. "I'll get right on it, Doctor."

"Anything else?" Leslie asked.

Kathy smiled slyly. "Oh, yes. Heather Anderson came in with her little girl, Kerry, this morning. For her flu shot, too."

Leslie grimaced. At nine years of age, Kerry Anderson was already a classic example of the spoiled child: doted on by her parents, given whatever she wanted no matter how outrageous the demand and downright impossible to deal with when she wasn't getting her way. And since Leslie was the one with the medical degree and had never been the kind to take orders from petulant children who tried to order her around in the way she administered care, it usually meant that Kerry worked even harder to make their times together wholly unpleasant.

She glanced at the clock that hung on the wall behind the receptionist. It was 9:25 am. "They're early."

Kathy nodded. "Uh-huh."

Leslie glanced back to the waiting room. "I don't see them."

There was something almost wolfish about the grin Kathy displayed as she gestured toward the examination rooms in the back of the suite. "Well, Rhonda didn't see any reason to take up your

valuable time with such a trivial thing as giving a kid a shot. Figured she'd take care of it one, two, three while you settled in."

"Oh, boy..." Leslie said. Rhonda Harrington was a recent addition to the staff, having just started three weeks ago. She was a few years younger than Leslie, with a headstrong attitude that initially made warming up to her a trifle difficult. She was the kind of person who spoke her mind quite openly and had little tolerance for troublesome patients (whiners, complainers and jerks go to the back of the line, thank you). But she was also a competent nurse who carried out her duties with a high level of professionalism and that made it easier to sometimes overlook the acerbic tone she normally used.

Still, putting Rhonda in a room with Kerry Anderson was like the old saying about oil and water: they just didn't mix. In this case, however, it was more like dealing with a ticking bomb. Eventually, it was going to explode; the only question was how many innocent bystanders would be caught in the blast.

"So, that would be the scream I heard before," Leslie said, grateful to know she hadn't been the one doing all the yelling earlier. "Kerry proving to be her usually difficult self?"

"Yup," Kathy replied. "Kid has quite a pair of lungs, don't you think?"

"I don't want a shot!" came another high-pitched protest from the rear of the suite. "I *want* the flu!"

"Yeah," Kathy added, slowly shaking her head. "A future *American Idol* superstar, that one. I can tell."

There was a muffled *clang*, as though something metallic had fallen to the exam room floor and bounced high.

Leslie sighed. "I guess I should go back there and see what the situation is."

"I guess you should," Kathy agreed. "Be sure to take a chair and a whip."

"And just which of them am I supposed to be training?" Leslie asked.

Kathy smiled. "The real question, Dr Coburn, is who are you supposed to be protecting yourself from?"

Leslie nodded wearily. "True. Very true."

She walked around the reception desk and headed down a long hallway that led to the back of the building. Like the waiting area, the walls were painted a pacifying lavender. This was part of a successful experiment suggested by Dr Gruber to use certain colors to ease a patient's nervousness as they followed a nurse to one of the three examination rooms used by the associates. Typically, patients entered medical offices with all the enthusiasm of prison inmates being led to an execution chamber, but without the calming benefit of a priest giving final rites. By reducing the "clinical feel" of the MMA, painting the walls in pastel colors—lavender for reception and the hallways, light blue for the doctors' private offices, a warm orange for the examination rooms—the amount of anxiety exhibited by the patients was also reduced. Not completely eliminated, but lowered enough for the ailing men, women and children to feel somewhat at ease in what they might usually consider an unfriendly environment (doctors *are* the bearers of bad news, as Mrs Horowitz once pointed out).

Another friendly touch was the addition of framed movie posters on the walls. This was Dr Marks's contribution to the office makeover. He was an avid movie buff, with what could only be described as an eclectic taste in cinematic masterpieces. The original *Star Wars* hung beside *Casablanca* outside the waiting room. *Citizen Kane*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* lined the corridor to the exam rooms, staring across the way at their counterparts from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Leslie had been encouraged to add some touches of her own, but as the youngest and newest associate, she didn't want to come across as trying too hard to one-up her superiors with far better decorating choices. Not right away, that is. So she settled for making sure the waiting area was always stocked with daily editions of the *Emerson Gazette*, the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *New York Times*, as well as the latest issues of *Entertainment Weekly*, *People*, *US*, *Ladies Home Journal* and *House and Garden*. Patients weren't going to stare at walls for hours, she'd told the other doctors, no matter how nice the

paint was or how well the hangings caught their eyes. They needed something to read, to take their minds off where they were and why they'd come, and two-year-old, dog-eared copies of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and *Readers Digest* just weren't going to cut it.

However, right at this moment Leslie wasn't in the mood to admire the fresh coat of paint that had been applied to the walls over the past weekend, or the latest poster Dr Marks had added to the wall of fame, or even whether Brad Pitt was having a torrid affair with Angelina Jolie while still professing his love for his wife, Jennifer Aniston. Okay, maybe she'd be a little curious about that last one. But as she hurried down the corridor, her sole focus was on preventing what could easily turn into an awkward situation for Marks Medical Associates, the kind often discussed on a monetary level, the kind often involving six-figure cash settlements. If Rhonda could just keep her cool for one more minute, long enough for Leslie to join her, the practice just might be able to get out of this with nothing more taxing than having to make an apology to an unruly child.

"Get away from me!" shrieked Kerry.

So much for an apology, Leslie thought.

She followed the sounds of conflict past the nurse's station to Examination Room Number Two, the one designed specifically for children. Here, the walls were decorated with large stickers of cartoon and comic book characters: *Pokemon* monsters, superheroic Power Rangers, Disney princesses like Jasmine from *Aladdin* and Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* and fairy-tale ogres like Shrek, among others. These were meant to attract the eyes and attention of children so they weren't concentrating on what their doctor was doing, especially when it involved a syringe. There were also a few teddy bears and stuffed animals propped in the corners for them to hang onto for moral support during the most trying times, again, situations usually involving vaccinations. The style of decoration had been suggested by Leslie's best friend, Shawna Greaves, and since Shawna was the mother of three pre-teen girls and two five-year-old

boys, who would know better what kids were into? Of course, not every child was charmed by the appearance of the room.

The door was open, but Leslie stayed in the hall just outside, so she could get an understanding of the situation and form a plan of action instead of just barging in. The first thing she saw was Kerry Anderson sitting on the edge of the padded examination table, arms stubbornly folded across her chest. Her bottom lip was pushed out in full pouting mode and her eyes flashed with the heat of a sun as she glared, no doubt at Rhonda, who was standing somewhere behind the door. To Kerry's right side stood her mother. An attractive blonde in her early thirties, Heather Anderson had apparently never learned how to assert herself when dealing with her only child, which meant Kerry had evolved into a stereotypical spoiled brat, never doing anything her parents asked of her, always being tolerated even in her worst behavior. It wasn't that Heather was a bad mother, or that she allowed Kerry to do whatever she wanted out of some misguided attempt to earn her child's love. She just didn't like being cast in the role of a disciplinarian. And that wouldn't be so bad if her husband weren't cut from the same cloth, as Leslie had discovered during Kerry's last visit.

"Mrs Anderson," Rhonda pleaded, "would you please tell your daughter to behave? The longer this procedure takes, the longer we're all going to be in here and the doctors do have other patients to see today."

Heather appeared to take a moment to gather her strength, then she smiled weakly at her little girl. "Kerry, honey, can't you please do what the nurse says?"

"No!" the child yelled. "I don't want to!"

Heather turned back to Rhonda, looking at her with a helpless, what do you want me to do? expression. "I'm sorry."

Rhonda stepped out from behind the door, jaw set in grim determination. "This is ridiculous!" Holding a syringe in her right hand, she reached out with her left to grasp Kerry's left forearm. "Do you think you could hold her still for a moment, Mrs Anderson?"

Heather gently placed her hands on Kerry's shoulders, though not hard enough to keep her in place, of course (that would be acting too

aggressively). If the child got fidgety with the needle in close proximity, the situation could become dangerous.

As if to demonstrate that concern, Kerry suddenly lashed out with her left foot as Rhonda moved in for another attempt. The shoe connected with the nurse's elbow, driving the arm upward, and Heather jumped back as the syringe swept past her face.

Lips pulled back in a snarl, Rhonda gave the girl's arm a strong tug. "Never kick a nurse with a needle," she growled. "Honey."

The fear that now shone in the girl's eyes could be seen clear across the examining room. Her gaze darted back and forth between the nurse's feral expression and the thin metal needle. And if that wasn't a cue to step in and calm everyone down, Leslie couldn't think of a better one.

Trying to appear casual, she strolled into the room. "Something I can do to help here, Rhonda?" she asked pleasantly.

The nurse looked surprised to see her. "Oh. Hello, Doctor. You're in early."

Leslie smiled and leaned in close. "Actually, I'm not," she whispered in Rhonda's ear. "This is just taking longer than you thought."

"Oh." An unmistakable expression of disappointment at having failed in her self-appointed mission flitted across Rhonda's face; it quickly changed to a hard, muscle-twisting frown as she glanced at her difficult patient. "Care to take a crack at this yourself?" she asked the doctor.

"Certainly," Leslie replied. She smiled at the little girl. "Kerry and I go back a ways, don't we, Kerry?"

"I don't want a shot!" the child insisted.

Looks like she got over her fear of Rhonda quickly enough, Leslie thought. Still, she kept the smile locked in place as she picked up the girl's chart from a Formica countertop near the door and gave it a cursory glance.

"Looks like you're a pretty healthy little girl," she commented. She pointed to Kerry's feet. "Fashionable, too. I love your shoes."

The child eyed her suspiciously. "They're Stevies," she replied slowly.

"I thought so. My friend Shawna has a daughter about your age. She won't wear any other style." Leslie drew closer, placing herself between Kerry and Rhonda. She slipped her free hand behind her back, gesturing for the nurse to pass her the syringe. "And look at those nails. What color is that?"

The girl held up her hands. "Primrose."

Leslie nodded as she felt the plastic tube being pressed into her fingers. "I understand that's the really hot color right now." She held up the chart as she turned to Heather. "Mrs Anderson, could you hold this for a second?"

The fake-out worked exactly as she planned. While Kerry's eyes followed the chart moving from one adult to the other, Leslie brought the syringe out from behind her back. When her other hand was freed up, she used it to gently seize Kerry's left arm and hold it firmly as the needle sunk into the flesh; with a satisfied smile, she pushed the plunger down.

Mission accomplished.

"Hey!" Kerry squealed. "You tricked me!"

"No trick, just a little misdirection," Leslie explained. "Part of the training you get in doctor school. My job is to keep you getting the flu, so we don't have to do this for a whole 'nother year."

The girl sighed and rubbed her sore arm. "Whatever..."

"I don't know how you keep your cool like that," Rhonda said a few minutes later, after they'd sent Kerry and her mom on their way. "I started to think I'd have to sedate her just to give her the shot."

Leslie grabbed her bag and headed across the hall to her office, nurse in tow. "Wouldn't that have involved using another needle?"

Rhonda smiled slyly. "Not if I'd used that rubber mallet in the maintenance closet."

Leslie sighed dramatically. "And your parents probably wonder why you never became a doctor."

"No, they don't," the nurse replied. "They're happy enough knowing I didn't turn out to be a barmaid."

Leslie flipped on the light switch as she stepped into the room. Overhead, a row of long fluorescent bulbs flickered, then snapped on to full luminescence. Like the doctor who considered this part of MMA her little slice of heaven, the office was well organized and neatly maintained, the choice of decorations limited to a few personal knickknacks, framed medical degrees and a pair of hanging plants near the windows. As relaxing as the outer areas might be for patients, Leslie, like her associates, felt the doctors' offices should reflect more of a professional attitude; in their opinion, it would be hard for a patient to take serious medical advice from a physician who displayed comic book characters or movie memorabilia on the walls of their inner sanctums.

She tossed the knapsack into a corner between her desk and a tall bookcase containing a multitude of medical reference volumes, then retrieved a white, knee-length lab coat from a hook affixed to the inside of the office door. The freshly cleaned coat was wrapped in clear plastic, its shoulders supported by a disposable plastic hanger. A medical supply service out of nearby Clarington provided the garments for all the staff of the practice, picking up the coats at the end of the day for cleaning and disinfecting, and replacing them with a fresh set for the next day's use.

Leslie unwrapped the coat and slipped it on, tossing both protective covering and hanger in a wastebasket. She crossed the room to her desk, where she picked up the small metal identification badge bearing her name from the green velvet ink blotter. She pinned the badge above the coat's left breast pocket, making certain it didn't tilt too much to one side, like the lopsided letter in her name she'd corrected on the building directory.

"So, tell me something, Dr Coburn," Rhonda began.

Leslie waved off the formal use of her title. "You can call me 'Leslie' when there are no patients around, Rhonda."

The nurse smiled. "Okay. Thanks."

"What's your question?" Leslie asked.

"I just wanted to know what your secret is for dealing with patients," she gestured with her thumb back over her shoulder, toward the waiting room, "like Little Miss Buttache there."

Leslie grinned broadly. "Must be that hundred grand in student loans I'm still paying off. Needing money to settle a bill that large can inspire you to be more tolerant with the people who *provide* those funds. That's how my father explained it to me when I was a frustrated resident at County General." She settled back in her chair. "So, what's next on the agenda?"

THREE

"A *plague*?" the doctor said in alarm. "How do you expect me to treat something like that?"

"I'm not asking you to treat it, doctor," Captain Mann replied gruffly. "I'm asking you to isolate it, come up with a cure for the blasted thing. Eradicate every single microbe of this disease before it's too late. The crew of this ship is counting on you to pull our collective fat out of the fire, or none of us will ever see Earth again. You're the best man for the job, Dick, and I have complete faith in your abilities."

"At least that makes one of us..." the sawbones mumbled. He pulled a cigarette from the thin metal case he carried in his flight jacket, used his nicked and scratched lighter to fire it up and inhaled deeply. Eyes closed, he let the smoke drift slowly from his mouth and nostrils, taking what pleasure he could during this small break from the perilous race. against time they'd found themselves in. "I'll do my best, Arlen," he vowed.

"That's all I can ask of you, doc. All I can ask of anyone on board."

Mann turned away from the ship's physician to gaze out of one of the *Agamemnon*'s observation ports. Beyond the foot-thick glass lay the rolling hills and bubbling streams of Zebulon, looking as tranquil and inviting as they had nine days ago, when the exploration ship had touched down. The captain frowned. It was such a beautiful world, with so many deadly secrets.

He rolled back the left sleeve of his flight jacket to inspect his arm. The infection was spreading, all right, and rapidly. The black, misshapen lump that had mushroomed near his wrist yesterday had almost reached his elbow by this morning. At the rate it was going, he had a week, maybe less, before his entire body was enveloped by the growth, if he didn't die from it first. The life expectancy of an infectee once they contracted the disease seemed to differ from one man to another; Ericksson had died within hours, but Bradshaw was still up and around, still carrying out his duties as the *Agamemnon*'s

security chief. Even though he'd been one of the first members of the exploration team to fall victim to, to...

"A space plague," Mann said quietly, as though saying it aloud would finally convince him this was all really happening. The bodies of the men he had already lost, buried on a hill a mile from the ship, should have been proof enough of that.

"I can't think of a better way to describe it," said a sultry, feminine voice behind him. Mann turned around to discover that Dr Rhodan had quietly stepped away, leaving his captain to his ruminations. In the sawbones's place now stood Diana Calloway, the raven-haired navigator. She leaned against the doorframe and eyed him coolly.

"Why aren't you at your post, Ensign Calloway?" Mann asked. He couldn't keep the smile out of his voice as he said it, however. He was always glad to see Diana. Just being near her gave him the strength to push on in the direst of situations, like this one. Only she wasn't the daughter of Space Command's hard-nosed CO, he might have been able to tell her how he really felt about her sooner. Now it could very well be too late.

She shrugged. "There's not much for a navigator to do on a ship when there's nowhere to navigate *to*, captain. Any idea when we might be able to blast off?"

Mann shook his head. "Not for awhile, I'm afraid. Not until the doc has licked this thing."

"But..." Diana shivered and hugged herself tightly, fear shining brightly in her eyes. "But what if he doesn't find a cure, Arlen?"

He walked over and gently wrapped his arms around her, ignoring the lumps on her back that he could feel through the stiff fabric of her uniform. "Then Zebulon becomes our new home, baby, for however long that might be."

She placed her head against his chest, and he stroked her hair, trying to soothe her fears. "Oh, Arlen..." she said, her voice heavy with emotion.

"That's the way it has to be, Diana," Mann said, easing her back so he could look her in the eye. "Can you imagine what would happen if we unleashed this plague on Earth? We'd be condemning billions of innocent people to a death sentence. And why? Because we got

homesick and decided to ignore Space Command protocols so we could see our families one last time?" He shook his head. "I won't do that, Diana, and I know you wouldn't do it, either, if you were in my place."

Diana nodded in agreement and wiped away her tears with the sleeve of her flight jacket. "You're right, Arlen. We can't go back; it wouldn't be right." She raised her head, trying her best to show some of the old cocky attitude that had made him fall head over heels in love with her from the first day they'd met. "If this is where we have to live out our remaining days in order to keep Earth safe, skipper, then that's exactly what we'll do."

"But we can still try and make the best of it, baby," Mann said. He took her hands in his and smiled awkwardly. He never *had* been very good in these kinds of situations. "What I'm trying to say is... would you consider living out those days as the wife of a ship's captain?"

It took a second or two for her brain to register just what he'd said. Then her eyes grew big as saucers. "Arlen, are you...?"

Diana gasped as he lowered himself down on one knee and removed his officer's cap. He hoped he didn't look too silly doing this and that none of the crew happened to walk by in the corridor outside. It wouldn't do for the men to see their captain prostrated before a female shipmate, even if she was a highly respected navigator. It just wasn't something officers did during a mission.

Well, damn the mission when it came to affairs of the heart. Mann cleared his throat. "Diana Calloway... Will you marry me?"

She sobbed loudly and threw her arms around his neck, almost knocking them both down.

"I'll take that to mean 'yes'," Mann said with a chuckle.

Together, they kneeled on the deck, drawing strength from one another. Mann smiled grimly, assured by the knowledge that not even a disease, capable of killing them in a matter of hours could destroy that most basic of human conditions: love.

Harry Raditch inserted a thin cardboard bookmark between the pages of the paperback novel and closed the book. It was such a moving story, he thought, full of clever plot twists and deep characterization. So much better than the pulpish 1950s dreck normally found around the time it was originally published, and almost impossible to put down once you started reading it.

At least that was how *he* felt about it, but then he always had a knack for becoming emotionally involved in the books he read, a habit carried over from his childhood. He wasn't bothered by it, though. Besides, if an author wasn't going to make his audience care for the characters he was writing about, he shouldn't have written the book in the first place.

He gazed at the cover again. *Mission to Zebulon*, by A.R. Douglas, proclaimed the title. "IT WAS A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY—BUT WHAT THEY DISCOVERED WAS DEATH!" A typically sensationalistic tagline meant to catch the eye of potential buyers as they scanned the wire racks of drugstores and newsstands for the latest books. It was almost as lurid as the image painted for the cover: a muscular, blond-haired Adonis in a skintight blue uniform and glass-bubble space helmet--apparently meant to represent the novel's protagonist, Captain Arlen Mann—with one hand holding a bulky laser pistol and the other wrapped around the waist of a dark-haired Amazon wearing a whisper-thin blue minidress and ankle boots. A fantasy depiction of the love interest, Diana Calloway, no doubt. A silver, torpedo-shaped spaceship, complete with navigational fins that doubled as landing legs, a staple in science fiction films of the time, rose proudly in the background against a velvety black, star-filled sky. It was the sort of cover that would be hard to miss, even at a casual glance.

Yet behind the overblown imagery lay a truly marvelous tale of adventure and peril, of love and hope and a two-fisted determination to overcome great odds. It was the kind of story that used to fire Harry's imagination as a boy, making him wish he could grow up to be an astronaut, or a test pilot, or the first space explorer to land on another planet and claim it in the name of Earth.

But the depths of the universe were filled with hidden dangers, most of which even today's scientific experts could hardly begin to comprehend. There were black holes and stars gone nova, asteroid belts and deadly levels of cosmic radiation, rogue comets and the potential for the universe to collapse in upon itself when it had finally grown too large. And sometimes the dangers came directly to Earth: asteroids that could have wiped out every species on the planet if they'd struck instead of missing their target; alien visitors from other worlds who abducted humans for use as test subjects (if you believed the reports released by certain organizations); solar flares that shot out from the sun and traveled millions of miles across space to swipe at the Earth with blazing fingers. In a sense, you didn't have to leave your own neighborhood to find trouble. Sooner or later, it would find you.

And who was to say there weren't unknown microbes floating around on the planets that NASA and the scientific community wished to explore, like those encountered by the crew of the *Agamemnon* in the book? Harry thought back to that incident, years ago, when a meteor believed to have come from Mars was discovered in Antarctica. The people who examined it had insisted the meteor contained evidence that there once had been life on Mars, microbes or something like that embedded in the rock, he recalled.

It had sent a chill through him, reminding him of Michael Crichton's novel, *The Andromeda Strain*, and its subsequent screen adaptation. In the story, a satellite lands outside a New Mexico town and the residents die soon after. The biophysicists who study the case discover evidence of a virus on the satellite, a virus that turns the victim's blood to powder. Did anyone testing the Martian rock consider the ramifications of unleashing such a microbe in real life before they went tearing into it with lasers? Possibly, but would there really be a way to protect an unsuspecting populace from something never before encountered if it was loosed? Harry rather doubted it.

His gaze was drawn back to the book cover. A space plague. What could something that horrific do if it ever came to Earth? Of course the one in Douglas's novel was a fictional virus, a disease created solely by the mind of its creator, a plot device meant to heighten the

reader's sense of anxiety as they accompanied Mann and his crew toward their ultimate fate, but... *what if?*

"The two most powerful words in the human language," Harry muttered. "What if." He mulled over the possibilities as he absently scratched an itch on the center of his chest. He stopped when he realized what he was doing. That had been the first symptom of the plague in *Mission to Zebulon*: an uncontrollable itch that spread across the torso, causing the victim to claw at their flesh, almost to the point of bloodletting.

Harry grunted. "Too much starch in the shirts again," he surmised. He'd have to talk to his housekeeper, Mrs Mendolsohn, about that.

He placed the novel on his desk, then swiveled his chair around so he could access his computer. He was already logged in to his website—bookfancier.com—and a quick check of recent activities told him there had been three online purchases in the past half-hour: a "Fine" 1965 paperback copy of *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury; an "Acceptable" book club reissue of Robert Bloch's Psycho trilogy (*Psycho*, *Psycho II*, and *Psycho House*) from 1988; and a "Collector's" slipcased, hardcover limited edition of Stephen King's *The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger*, signed and numbered by the author. And that last item did not come cheap. Harry smiled. Not even ten am and already business was brisk.

He'd gotten into the book-selling business shortly after he graduated from college, selling the parts of his vast collection that he no longer read or was interested in keeping at flea markets and the occasional garage sale. What began as a way to make a little pocket change soon metamorphosed into a career when he discovered that some of his books were actually worth *real* money and were greatly sought after by other bibliophiles looking to complete their own collections. Before he knew it, there was a tidy sum tucked away in his savings account, and a fair amount of empty shelving at the Raditch household. His father was delighted to see that, because it meant those "damn books" were finally going to stop taking up

valuable space better occupied (in his opinion) by the growing collection of the ships-in-a-bottle he so enjoyed building in the basement.

And then people started asking Harry to locate books for them that he *didn't* own.

The Book Fancier opened its doors two years later on Brewer Street, in downtown Emerson, a hole-in-the-wall, blink-and-you-missed-it storefront situated between a laundromat and a mom-and-pop delicatessen, yet conveniently set right behind a bus stop. This, however, was in the days before the residents of the downtown district began pushing the mayor for improvements to the area and long before painters and sculptors moved in and started calling the winding, narrow streets and World War II-era lofts their home, so Harry spent far more days watching people walk by than welcoming them into his shop. But that was all right. As the years passed and the neighborhood underwent its inevitable changes, Harry was able to reap the benefits of a more scholarly clientele eager to purchase the rare art books and first-edition novels that could only be found on his shelves. They were the best years of Harry's life and, coincidentally, the years when he was in the best of health. Nothing succeeds like success, as the old saying goes, and with a profitable business to run, Harry's thoughts became focused more on keeping a good thing going and less on worrying about whether he might pick up something contagious by touching the books he ordered from other bibliopoles.

The medical world breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Unfortunately, another old saying would eventually be heard: All good things must come to an end. Sales slumped as people turned to the Internet to hunt down the books they wanted, the bus stop was moved one block north due to zoning changes and the rent on the shop increased dramatically as Downtown (now always spoken of with a capital "d" by those in the know) became the hip, trendy area of Emerson in which to live and work. And when a Starbucks coffee shop or a Krispy Kreme doughnut eatery can make for a more profitable tenant in a charming little hole-in-the-wall, blink-and-you-missed-it location than some germophobe and his collection of

used books... well, it didn't really come as much of a surprise for Harry when the building owner made it clear he wouldn't be offering a lease renewal for The Book Fancier.

It also wasn't much of a surprise when Harry's health took a turn for the worse. At least that's what he tried to convince Dr Marks was happening. But his physician of the past decade didn't want to hear about it, even suggested Harry might be imagining the whole thing and should see a different kind of health care professional: one of the psychological persuasion. Getting such a cold-blooded response from a man he'd depended on for so many years to help him through the spinal meningitis scare, the whooping cough incident, the bout of gastroenteritis, the stomach-twisting pains of Campylobacteriosis—to name just a few of the major illnesses they'd battled together over the last ten years—had been far more upsetting to Harry than whatever disorder had currently struck him down. He was certain it was Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, incidentally.

Somehow, though, Harry found the strength to persevere, even without his doctor providing support. His housekeeper, Mrs Mendolsohn, convinced her son Gregory to gather together some of his college friends in order to move Harry's stock of books to a storage facility. From discussing his business problems with other sellers, he got the idea to set up an internet website and make his collection available to potential customers around the globe. Why should Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble be the only outlets for people seeking the kinds of books they needed? As his fellow biblioplists had explained, the world wide web had become the last refuge for struggling shop owners, allowing them to stay open without being completely driven out of business by the mall-like superstores that tended to dominate an area and pull away much-needed customers.

Fortunately, Gregory's girlfriend, Sascha, was what she referred to as a "Class-1 technogeek," so she was able to provide Harry with assistance as he went through the tasks involved in putting together the elements that would move The Book Fancier to its new home: upgrading his home computer system, inventorying his stock, finding an Internet host to register the domain name and hold onto

his little spot on the Web. It took time, and brought him into contact with far too many people for his liking, but the push to succeed had once again taken hold of him, focusing his thoughts on his work rather than his illnesses.

But after the first few months, although business was doing well enough, Harry began withdrawing from the world, preferring to deal with the faceless visitors to his site instead of having to interact with real live human beings. Only Mrs Mendolsohn was still allowed access to the house. It made for less stressful situations, he told himself, not having to worry about guests invading his home and spreading their harmful germs around. Besides, what if he *did* allow people back in, and he fell ill? Who would run the business then? His housekeeper? Not very likely!

No, he decided, it was all for the best if he just removed himself from the world and concentrated on his work. Less risk of infection that way, and fewer opportunities for contagions to launch attacks on his immune system.

Not that his status as a partial shut-in kept him out of the offices of Marks Medical Associates. He still showed up on a fairly regular basis, and perhaps the day when Marks suggested Leslie Coburn take over as Harry's primary physician had been a blessing in disguise. Harry had known he was being shoved to the side. Looking back, he'd realized that his relationship with the doctor *had* become more and more confrontational with each visit over the years and during their last contretemps, Marks hadn't even bothered to hide the fact that he considered Harry to be a hypochondriacal nuisance. But Coburn turned out to be a surprisingly competent replacement, despite her youth and limited experience in handling patients. She was certainly the first doctor he'd met who treated him with a modicum of respect.

The turning of a key in the front door interrupted Harry's thoughts. He glanced at the clock in the upper right-hand corner of the computer screen: 10:30 am. Where had the time gone, he

wondered? He grunted. Well, that's what he got for sitting around woolgathering, when he should be conducting his business.

He heard the door open, followed by the sound of footsteps in the foyer. "Hello?" A woman's voice with a heavy Russian accent. "Mr Raditch?"

"I'm in my office, Mrs Mendolsohn," Harry called back. Well, not really an office, he reminded himself. The room he, his computer and his voluminous lists of inventoried books occupied used to be his father's den, but it was as close to an office as Harry was ever going to get, now that the Technological Age had allowed him to relocate the store's operations to his home.

Muffled footfalls on the hall carpet, moving in his direction. And then Mrs Mendolsohn appeared in the doorway, looking as cheerful as ever. In her mid-fifties, she was of average height, about twenty or so pounds overweight, with short black hair streaked with gray. She was dressed in her typical "uniform" of blue blouse, jeans and white tennis shoes. She made no attempt to enter the room, ever mindful that she needed to keep out of her employer's inner sanctum. Health concerns, after all.

Elise Mendolsohn and her husband, Anatole, had emigrated to the United States from St Petersburg over twenty years ago, Russian Jews seeking a better life in the Land of Golden Opportunities. At first, they found a home in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, New York, where a large community of their countrymen had settled. From what Elise had told Harry, as he pieced together the parts of the story he'd heard over the years, the Mendolsohns' stay in Brooklyn hadn't lasted all that long, not after Anatole's run-in with the hotheaded son of a Russian mobster—a "small misunderstanding," Elise had phrased it. Small or not, it apparently convinced Anatole that perhaps the Mendolsohns should seek their fortunes elsewhere, preferably far away from New York. It was a search that eventually brought them to Emerson, Illinois, where Elise took jobs as a housekeeper and Anatole made a decent income as a licensed electrician.

Elise came to Harry with the highest recommendation from some of his late mother's friends and since he'd never been experienced in

the culinary arts, he hired her to cook for him and do a little cleaning. Only a little, though. As someone concerned about the ever-present threat posed by germs, Harry kept a meticulously tidy home; all he needed Elise to do was wash the dishes and glasses he used for his meals... although he often cleaned them again after she'd left for the day. One could never be too careful.

"How are you today, Mrs Mendolsohn?" Harry asked.

"Oh, fine, fine, Mr Raditch," she replied. "Thank you for asking."

It was how they normally started their conversations when she arrived, not so much because Harry was concerned for her health, but because he was concerned for his own. Mrs Mendolsohn was the only person he allowed into his house on a regular basis. If she wasn't feeling "fine," he expected her to stay away until she felt better or else he'd have to start looking for a new housekeeper.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

Harry smiled. "A little."

Elise nodded in that knowing way of hers. "Then you go back to your work. I go to kitchen and fix you a nice breakfast. Maybe an omelet?"

"That sounds wonderful," Harry replied. He held up an index finger in warning and looked at her sternly. "Whites of the eggs only."

"I remember, Mr Raditch," she said pleasantly. "I always remember."

Harry chuckled and forced himself to relax. "That you do, Mrs Mendolsohn," he agreed. "That you do."

She trundled off toward the kitchen and Harry settled back in his chair. Yes, he should get back to work. He called up the recent sales transactions on his computer, making certain the books that had been ordered were indeed in stock, checking to see that all the Paypal payments had gone through and the recipients' addresses had been confirmed. When he was satisfied that everything was as it should be, he sent out e-mails to the buyers to let them know that their orders were being processed and would be mailed out within twenty-four hours.

Then, while he waited for the list of purchases to roll out of his printer, he opened the middle drawer of his desk and pulled out a disposable surgical mask and a pair of white cotton gloves. He was allergic to the powder used to line the insides of latex gloves. That, at least, was one ailment not even Dr Marks could argue about. Slipping his hands into their protective sheaths, he picked up the mask, rose to his feet and walked out of the den. A short walk down the hallway toward the back of the house brought him to a flight of stairs leading to the basement.

The loud hum of dehumidifiers assaulted his ears as he reached the bottom step. The noise was a constant annoyance, like having a jet engine roaring day and night under the floorboards without the benefit of an off switch, but it was the small price one paid for ensuring the air stayed dry and warm in a large underground space prone to high levels of humidity. If it wasn't for these technological marvels pulling moisture out of the air, the basement would probably smell like mildew—and decomposing paper.

It had been a potentially risky choice, but in a further bid to cut overhead costs, Harry had given up renting the storage facility some time ago and had had the cellar converted into a bookcase-laden vault filled with shelf upon shelf of his precious inventory. So far, it had turned out to be the right decision. Storing the books in the house cost him nothing extra and as long as the dehumidifiers' motors kept running and he remembered to pay the electrical bill on time, The Book Fancier would continue to keep its cyberspace doors open.

Harry hooked the elastic bands of the surgical mask around his ears, wanting to avoid breathing in any airborne dust particles, and made his way between the stacks to pull down the ordered volumes. Each book was sealed in a thick bag made of Mylar, the same polyester plastic used by comic book collectors to protect their most valued copies of *Spider-Man*, *Batman* or *The X-Men*, which kept the pages from browning and the covers (especially those of the paperbacks) from curling. Locating the purchased items took little time because Harry prided himself on keeping his backstock as

orderly as his home. He was soon climbing the steps up to the first floor.

Elise met him in the hallway. She looked mildly worried. "Mr Raditch, I call and call for you to come and eat, but I never hear you say anything back."

Harry removed the mask and gloves and handed them to her. "I'm sorry, Mrs Mendolsohn," he gestured toward the cellar, then closed the door to muffle the drone of the machines, "but you know how impossible it is to hear down there when the dehumidifiers are running."

She smiled. "Oh, yes. All that noise." She reached out and gently tugged him by the hand. "But come, come. Your food is getting cold."

Harry froze, his astonished gaze fixed on her fingers as they encircled his wrist, fingers that had been touching raw eggs not five minutes ago. Oh, God, he could practically feel the salmonella germs passing through his skin. It was almost like the hand of Death had touched him, and he nervously scratched his chest, the sudden itch that had sprung up only making things worse in his mind. "Mrs Mendolsohn..." he said hoarsely.

She caught sight of his frightened expression, looked at what he was staring at and immediately released him. "Oh, Mr Raditch, I'm so sorry!" she cried in remorse. "I didn't think—"

"It's... it's all right, Mrs Mendolsohn," he nervously assured her. "It was... it was just an accident, that's all..." He waved off her apology, his concentration focused on the sweat he could feel beading on his forehead. His skin felt clammy, and the itching increased its intensity. He was definitely coming down with something. "I just need to lie down for a little bit." He flashed a lopsided smile. "Maybe you should go home for now. I'll give you a call later, when I'm feeling better."

"You sure you want me to go, Mr Raditch?" Elise asked. "Maybe I should call a doctor?"

"I'll take it care of it, thank you," Harry replied, unable to keep the tension from his voice. Why couldn't the woman just do as she was told? Hadn't she already done enough to him?

He walked away from the housekeeper before he lost his temper and headed up the stairs to his bedroom, trying to remain calm, trying to convince himself he was simply overreacting to the physical contact. But Harry knew *something* was working its way through his body; it was just a question of what it would turn out to be.

Had he paused long enough to glance back and see whether Mrs Mendolsohn had followed his instruction to leave, he might have noticed the puzzled look on Elise's face as she began scratching her chest for no apparent reason.

FOUR

For Leslie, the rest of the day's appointments passed without incident, a cosmic balance of some sort to the Kerry Anderson situation that morning. After the expected post-lunchtime rush of patients—mostly children and a few adults in need of flu shots—the pace began to slow to a steady crawl around three o'clock. It gave Leslie a chance to stretch out on the couch in her office and give her aching feet a much-deserved rest. With a cup of light-and-sweet coffee in one hand and a copy of *People* magazine in the other, she momentarily lost herself in catching up with the latest fashions all the stars in Hollywood were wearing. Besides, she had to find out all the details of that rumored Brad/Jennifer/Angelina love triangle.

There was a knock on the door. She looked up to find Collin Marks standing in the hall. Marks was in his late forties, handsome, fit and tanned, the kind of man who looked more like the leading actor of a television drama than a licensed physician. It probably accounted for why a great number of his patients were female. Leslie wouldn't have hesitated to make George Clooney her doctor if he ever set up a practice, so it only stood to reason that women would gravitate to the closest approximation of the former *ER* star they could find, once they found out he existed. And yet, despite the good looks and boyish smile, there was something of the old-fashioned family doctor about Marks. Like his father before him, he still made house calls, which was a rarity these days in the medical community.

"Hey, Leslie," he said. "You have a minute?"

Leslie swung her feet onto the floor and dropped the magazine on the cushion beside her. "Sure thing, Dr Marks. I was just taking a little break."

Marks grinned as he entered the office. "We can all use one of those every once in a while, right?"

She gestured toward one of her guest chairs. "Please, have a seat. My next appointment isn't for another twenty minutes."

Marks took her up on the offer and lowered himself into the seat with a satisfied groan. "My feet are just killing me today," he said as

he pointed at them. "The ol' Plantains for Jesus are acting up again."

Leslie chuckled. That was Marks' way of referring to the podiatric condition he'd developed from years of standing too often for long periods of time: plantar fasciitis. It was an inflammation of the tissue supporting the arches of his feet; when it really troubled him, he would feel extreme pain in his heels, a nagging reminder that he needed to sit down every now and then.

"So," he said, leaning back in the chair, "how goes the war?"

Leslie shrugged. "The typical aches and pains you'd expect from our senior patients. A four-year-old with a marble stuck in his nose that I managed to coax out. A few more people immunized against the flu."

Marks grunted. "Nasty bug going around. New kind of strain, according to the articles I've been reading. Might even be resistant to some of the antibiotics we normally use."

"Well, we've been lucky in dealing with it so far," Leslie replied.

Marks reached back to rap his knuckles on her desk. "Knock on wood," he said with a smile. Then he eased back in the seat and just sat there, quietly staring at her.

Leslie raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Was there something else you wanted to talk about, Dr Marks?"

He seemed to gather his thoughts for a few seconds, then slowly nodded. "How is Nurse Harrington working out?"

Uh-oh, Leslie thought. I'm pretty sure I know where this is going.

"Well... Rhonda's very good at her job," she replied almost automatically. It sounded like a standard, noncommittal way of answering a question about someone you couldn't quite get a handle on. It made her cringe inwardly.

Marks said nothing, as though he expected her to continue.

"Um... are you asking me to evaluate her performance?" she finally asked.

"Not really." He rested his elbows on the arms of the chair and steepled his fingers. "I got a call a little before lunch," he said slowly. "From Heather Anderson. I understand she and her little girl came in this morning."

And that was the sound of the other shoe dropping, Leslie thought.

"She told me about an... incident involving Rhonda," Marks continued. "The way she described it, it sounded like it had left her daughter," the left corner of his mouth curled in obvious distaste, "emotionally scarred."

Leslie sighed deeply. She really should have known better than to expect Mrs Anderson to just let the whole thing blow over. Obviously, the woman was well-practiced in the art of deception. After Kerry received her inoculation, Heather had acted like nothing had ever happened, even thanked Rhonda for her time.

But this turn of events didn't come as a complete surprise to Leslie. In the back of her mind, having seen how confrontational Rhonda had been with the child, she feared it would be only a matter of time before Heather finally decided to pursue the issue with the head of the association. In a way, she was asserting herself to the one person who'd have no choice but to apologize for her bad behavior. And it wouldn't be Kerry.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say the 'incident' traumatized the child —" Leslie began.

"That was how the mother described it," Marks interjected. He shrugged. "I admit it sounds highly unlikely. If anyone suffered emotionally, I'd say it was Mrs Anderson from the way she was shouting on the phone. But it's not the sort of unpleasantness we need to repeat."

"I understand, Dr Marks," Leslie replied solemnly. "Have you spoken to Rhonda about this?"

"Not yet," Marks said. "I wanted to discuss it with you first, get your take on things." He reached into the right pocket of his lab coat, fished around for a bit and pulled out a small metal tin. He extended it toward her. "Mint?"

Leslie shook her head. "No thanks."

Marks shrugged. "Suit yourself." He opened the tin and took out a large, pill-shaped candy and popped it in his mouth. "They're sugar-free," he said with a sly grin.

Leslie chuckled. "Oh, all right." She daintily reached into the tin with the tips of her thumb and index finger and removed one, then followed suit. She knew what he was up to: he always offered sweets

as a way of breaking the ice when he wanted to discuss matters of a serious nature. And, of course, *he* knew she could never resist an offer of candy.

They sat there for a few seconds, sucking on their mints, until Leslie decided it was time to get to the point. "So, what did you want to ask me?" she said.

Marks paused a moment before replying. "Well, according to Mrs Anderson, you walked into the room just as Nurse Harrington was making..." he held up his hands to form quotation marks with his index and middle fingers, "threats' to her daughter. That you stopped her from manhandling Kerry, whom she'd already scared half to death. Is this true?"

Leslie didn't respond right away. How could she? She'd seen it happen with her own eyes, which made it hard to take Rhonda's side in the argument. On the other hand, Leslie knew just how maddeningly frustrating a patient Kerry Anderson could be.

"I'll admit Kerry was scared, like any kid is when they're getting a shot," she said carefully. "And that Rhonda might have been a little too... determined to give her the vaccination, but I'd have to say they were equally at fault."

Marks regarded her for a moment. "Very diplomatically put and I'm sure Rhonda would appreciate it, but it doesn't really answer my question. Was she making threats to a nine year-old girl? Did she, in fact, almost stab Mrs Anderson in the eye with the syringe during the tussle that followed?"

Now that behavior Leslie could defend. "It was nothing like that, Dr Marks. Rhonda tried to give Kerry the shot. Kerry kicked her on the elbow with her feet, making Rhonda's arm go flying up. That's how Heather came close to getting hit. There was no 'tussle'."

He mulled it over for a few seconds. "And the threats?"

"I wouldn't really call it a threat," Leslie replied. "It was more like a... a stern warning about the danger involved in kicking someone holding a needle."

"How stern? Did she put a hand on the child?"

Leslie swallowed and felt a weight form in the pit of her stomach. "Shouldn't Rhonda be here to answer these questions?" she asked

nervously.

Marks' gaze hardened a little. "She will, later. Right now I'm asking you. Did she touch the daughter in a forceful manner?"

"Yes," Leslie said softly. She turned her attention to the coffee cup she hadn't realized she was still clutching in both hands.

Marks exhaled sharply. "Well, that's the problem, isn't it?"

She looked up. "Dr Marks, I'm sure Rhonda tried to be as considerate as possible before I got there. It's just that Kerry can be something of a—"

"Pain in the ass?" Marks finished. She nodded in agreement. "Maybe. But pain in the ass or no, Leslie, it's not good for the reputation of this practice if our nurses start roughing up little girls because they won't hold still to take their medicine."

"Yes, you're right," Leslie agreed. "It's just that, over the past three months, Rhonda has shown she's really good at her job. I don't think it's fair to judge her behavior on the basis of one slip-up."

"Two," Marks said.

Leslie started. "Two?"

He nodded. "A little over a month ago, when you were on vacation. She had a similar... altercation with Jack Stanton. He showed up without an appointment, insisted he see Dr Gruber, said it was an emergency. She told him to sit in the waiting room until there was an opening in Tony's schedule. I just happened to be coming out of my office, so I was able to calm the waters." He grimaced. "Turned out Jack was having an appendicitis attack and we had to rush him to County General. Fortunately, we caught it in time, but the damn appendix was on the verge of bursting. Jack came out of surgery all right, with no complications and agreed to let the matter lie."

It was almost too wild a story to believe. "I never heard about that," she said. "So what happened?"

"I gave Rhonda a talking to," he replied. "Told her she needed to be more respectful of folks coming to us for help... if she wanted to keep her job. I thought maybe she'd learned her lesson after that." He frowned. "Guess I was being too optimistic."

An uncomfortable silence settled between them, Leslie staring at the now cold coffee, Marks apparently focused on a small spot on the

carpet. Finally, she turned back to him. "What do you plan on doing about this problem?"

"I don't know," Marks admitted. "I'll probably think it over tonight. Then you and I should sit down with Tony tomorrow when we have a mutual clear spot on our schedules to discuss a solution."

"Me?" Leslie asked, surprised.

Marks flashed a lopsided grin. "Well, you are an associate, Doctor Coburn."

"Oh," Leslie said. "I just figured, with me being the youngest member..."

"That you didn't have a say in how things run around here, beyond putting magazines in the waiting room?" He winked. "We all go down together or not at all, doctor." He rose to his feet. "Well, back to work. Don't mention any of this to Rhonda, all right? No reason to get her upset before we've made a decision."

"Okay," Leslie said, her voice sounding very small to her ears. As the weight in her stomach shifted around, she couldn't help but wonder if executioners felt like this on the night before they carried out a death sentence.

That feeling still hadn't gone away hours later, as she sat down to dinner with Terry Woodling, an old college friend and former lover down from Chicago on business for the week. The restaurant was quaint; a hole-in-the-wall French bistro considered one of the best in Downtown, even though it was tightly wedged between a twenty-four-hour laundromat and a Starbucks. And Terry was still as charming and funny and heart-stoppingly gorgeous as he had been during those magical six months. Even so, she couldn't keep her thoughts focused on anything but the part she was going to play in Rhonda's potentially dark future.

"I'm not boring you, am I?" Terry asked.

The question cut through the clutter building up in her head and she smiled, cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She reached across

the table to take his hand. "You've never been boring," she assured him.

He flashed a movie-star smile. God Almighty, how had she ever been so stupid as to let this one get away, she wondered? "I thought all the talk about the business articles I write for the *Sun-Times* was starting to put you to sleep?"

"No, it's not that," she assured him with a shake of her head. "I've just had a lot on my mind recently."

He placed his hand over hers. She tingled at the warmth of his skin and her breath caught in her throat. "Just like back in college," he said.

She started. Had he seen the way she'd reacted to his touch? "Excuse me?" she stammered, trying to pull her hand back.

He didn't let go. "All wrapped up in your thoughts. Still trying to figure out how to cure the world's ills," he replied.

"Oh, that." She laughed nervously and then shrugged. "I guess some old habits are hard to break."

She decided not to say more about the subject. Why bother him with her troubles? Had it really been two years? They were supposed to be enjoying themselves, catching up on what they'd been doing since they'd last spoken on the phone, reminiscing about old times. Not wasting the evening talking about her problems with a co-worker. Besides, from the way he was holding her hand, she could still feel that spark they used to share, especially since Terry had mentioned he was "between" relationships and she had admitted to the same. In all honesty, she couldn't remember the last time she'd been on a date she actually enjoyed as much as this one. Not that she'd become a recluse over the last twenty-four months. There had been a number of men who had passed through her life. They were certainly attractive, and some of them had even been mildly interesting, but none had been able to come close to the combination of looks, quiet self-confidence and charm that Terry brought to the table.

Or, she wondered, was it just that her fond memories of an ex-lover had placed him on a pedestal of sorts, elevated him to a level that could never be reached by another man? It would go a ways

toward explaining why she'd never gotten too close in the relationships that followed since they'd amicably drifted apart eight years ago.

Eight years. Had that much time really gone by? It didn't seem that long, but calendars—and the laugh lines that had begun forming near the corners of her mouth—didn't lie. Yet here they were, back together if only for one night, holding hands in an intimate little bistro and her heart was racing, it was difficult to catch her breath, she felt hot and sweaty and dizzy even though there was a chill running up her back, she couldn't help but keep staring at his eyes and... and...

Lord, she thought, I certainly did fall hard when I fell in love with him, didn't I?

"Hey, do you feel all right?" he asked, and rubbed her hand. "It feels like you're burning up." The look of concern she saw on his face made her smile. He still cared about her. "You're not pushing yourself too hard, are you?"

"Well, saving the world is a lot of work," she said with a grin.

Terry nodded. "True, but you can't save the world if you're laid up in bed, sick as a dog. You need to pace yourself, Leslie. Even Super Woman needs a night off once in a while."

She laughed. "Super Woman? Wow. I haven't heard you call me that since—"

"Since we broke up?" he asked.

The laugh faded slowly, became a melancholy smile. "Yeah." She squeezed his hand. "We had some good times back then, didn't we?"

"The best," he said. "I guess we just weren't ready to make it a permanent thing. And then we let the chance slip away. You know, building our careers and all that, going after that brass ring our dads were always telling us to reach for."

Leslie nodded wistfully in agreement. "Yes, I do know. And I'd have to say we've both been pretty successful at it."

"But that doesn't mean we couldn't try it again."

Now he really could hear her breath catch. She gasped loud enough for even the waiter to halt in mid-serve to the couple at the next table. She fell into a coughing jag and pulled her hand away,

then reached for the water glass beside her. She took small sips as the coughs subsided, massaging her throat to ease the pain.

"What are you talking about?" she croaked when she was finally able to speak.

"Well, neither of us is seeing anyone," Terry replied, "and Chicago isn't all that far away from Emerson. An hour on a commuter flight either way, and we could see if there's still something we could build on." An embarrassed smile stretched the corners of his lips. "To tell you the truth, I've been thinking about you a lot lately. Don't know why. Maybe I passed a woman on the street who was wearing the same perfume you used to, or I heard a song on the radio you liked. All I do know is that once you popped into my head, I couldn't get you out." The smile widened. "And I wasn't all that sure I wanted you out."

Now Leslie was smiling like a Chesire Cat. "I... I don't know what to say, Terry. It's very kind of you."

"And when my editor asked if I'd be interested in coming down here," he continued, "to work up a feature article on the transformation of Downtown and the business district..." He shrugged. "I figured it might be a sign of some kind that I should maybe give you a call and invite you out to dinner. I didn't even know if you were involved with somebody, but I had to find out for certain. So I worked up the nerve and took a chance."

"And here we are," she said.

He chuckled. "And here we are."

They sat quietly for a few seconds, avoiding eye contact, neither really sure where to take the conversation from that point. At least that's how Leslie saw it. It wasn't as uncomfortable a silence as the one she and Dr Marks had shared that afternoon, but...

I thought you weren't going to dwell on work, she scolded herself. So, just stop it.

"What do—" they suddenly said together. Terry stopped and gestured for her to speak first; she insisted he do likewise.

"Okay." He folded his hands on the table and looked at her. "What do you think about what I said? About us getting back together?"

Moment of truth time, girl, she told herself. You can either agree to this, and maybe get back that part of your life you've been pining for all this time, or spend another eight years wondering about what might have been.

"I'd... like to give it a try," she said slowly.

Terry's face lit up like someone had just thrown a spotlight on it.

She held up a hand to cut him off before he could reply. "But I'm not promising anything, Terry. We have to be realistic about this. I'm a doctor with a lot of responsibilities and a partner in a medical practice. And you have responsibilities to your newspaper, with all that comes with that job. I hate sounding like I'm laying out ground rules right from the start, but if we're going to try to get back what we had in college, it's going to take a lot of effort."

"You mean like finding ways to work around our schedules?" he asked.

"For starters," she replied. "We're also not the same people we were back then, we've both changed. I hope you don't expect us to just pick up where we left off eight years ago. We have to take it slow; get to know each other again."

Terry frowned and stared at his hands, taking more time than she thought he would to consider her terms. She nervously chewed on her bottom lip as the seconds ticked away, certain she'd killed her one chance at rekindling a romance that obviously still meant so much to her. He'd made a simple offer. Why did she have to go running off at the mouth like that and start making demands? They hadn't even gotten through dinner yet! Inwardly, she groaned. She felt like banging her head against the table for being such an idiot.

Then he looked up and smiled. "Okay."

"H-huh?" Not the best possible response she could have given, but it was the first thing that tumbled past her numbed lips.

"I said, 'Okay,'" Terry repeated. "If that's what it's going to take to make this work, we'll do it your way." He held up a warning finger. "But I'm not making any guarantees, either. Your job is in one location, so I pretty much know where to find you during the day. But even a business reporter can travel around a lot to cover stories. I might have to put off some of our get-togethers if I have an

assignment that takes me out of town." He frowned and glanced at the table. "I know canceling dates at the last second was the kind of thing that caused our break-up in the first place, Lee, but nowadays I have to go where the stories take me."

"Fair enough," Leslie said. "But I could still reach you on your cell phone or by e-mail if I had to, right?"

"You bet." He grinned. "Such is the life we lead in the wondrous Age of Electronics, huh? Separated by distance, but never really far away from each other."

"It sure beats having to pull my Super Woman costume out of the back of my closet and fly directly to you every time I want to chat." She smiled, a part of her still finding it hard to believe he'd said yes. "The thing smells too much like mothballs after all these years. And spandex makes me look fat."

He chuckled. "I find that hard to believe. Maybe your hair's a little curlier and longer than I remember it, but you haven't changed a bit since college." He smiled slyly. "You know, if you need somebody's opinion about how you look in spandex, I could make some adjustments to my schedule while I'm in town."

"We'll see..." Leslie said flirtatiously. "Slow and steady, remember? Let's see where this evening takes us and go from there."

But even before the waiter strolled over to take their orders, she had a fairly good idea of where things were headed. She flashed a lascivious smile at Terry, wondering if there were any good red-meat dishes on the menu. She might need to build up her strength for later that night.

FIVE

Harry Raditch was in a race against time and coming in a distant second.

He fidgeted in the back of the private car he'd ordered from the Starlite Limousine Service, drumming his glove-encased fingers on the leather overnight bag that rested on his lap. He'd been too nervous to drive himself to the doctors' office, considering the way his health was beginning to deteriorate; getting into a car accident, even a minor fender-bender, would have certainly made matters worse. It was far more sensible to have someone else transport him, someone who could trust their own vision.

And speaking of vision, he couldn't help but notice how often the driver kept glancing at him in the rearview mirror. But, Harry reasoned, it probably wasn't his almost constant shifting around that called attention to him, it was his clothing. As cool as the early spring weather was, there really was no need for the overcoat he'd thrown over his dark suit, or the fedora pulled low over his eyes, or the dark sunglasses and gloves... under normal conditions. But, then, there was nothing normal about what was happening to him.

"Couldn't you go a little faster?" he asked the driver. He made no attempt to keep the impatience he felt out of his voice.

The driver was a man in his early fifties who possessed the kind of no-nonsense attitude probably honed from years of chauffeuring clients to their destinations. He looked at Harry again in the mirror. "You want faster? Go rent a race car."

"There's no need to get snippy," Harry shot back. "This happens to be a matter of life and death."

"So is keeping my job," the driver replied. "No job, no income. No income, no money to pay for food. No food, I die." He shrugged. "Everything's relative."

Harry was taken aback. Here he was, facing a major medical crisis, and he was getting dime-store philosophical drivel from a... from a third-rate cabbie!

He reached into the bag and pulled out a notepad and pen. "What's your name?" he demanded. "When I'm one hundred percent again, I think I should have a talk with your employer about the attitude of some of his chauffeurs."

"It's Spenser, with an 's'. Like the poet." The driver's reflection showed a wide grin. "I got that from a private eye TV show called *Spenser for Hire* that was on the air years and years ago. That Robert Urich, he was some great actor, you know?"

"No, I don't," Harry said curtly.

"I really liked how he used to say that to his clients," the driver continued, either ignoring the comment or having missed it entirely, "so I started using it." He shrugged again. "Don't get to use it a lot. Most folks don't care *who's* driving them, long as they get where they're going."

"Well, Mr Spenser with an 's'," Harry said pointedly as he jotted down the name, "I *do* care. And you can be certain of a reprimand when your supervisors have heard from me."

"You wouldn't be the first complainer I've had," Spenser said pleasantly. "And I'm sure you won't be the last." Then his eyes narrowed and the passive expression faded as he stared at his passenger's reflection. "But I'm still not going to break the speed limit, not unless you're about to keel over before we get to the clinic. I don't need dead bodies in the back of my limo."

"No, I am not about to 'keel over'," Harry said testily.

Spenser nodded. "Glad to hear it."

"Look, you don't understand the severity of the situation!" Harry barked. "I'm a very ill man!"

"You sound pretty healthy to me, at least judging by the way you're carrying on back there," Spenser commented.

Harry leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes. Nothing he could say was ever going to sway this oaf from his fear-of-a-speeding-ticket decision and he was just too tired to continue the debate. Let the man drive at his own pace; if Harry died on the way, then let it be on his head. Maybe a guilty conscience would do something to fix that deplorable attitude he showed toward his passengers.

"You don't look like somebody who's come down with anything major," Spenser added. No doubt an attempt to make amends before they reached their destination and to sound sympathetic about his client's medical condition, so he'd get a decent-sized tip. Fat chance of that happening now. "Maybe you're not as sick as you think."

"How I wish that were true," Harry said hollowly. He sighed. "Lord, how I wish that were true."

Leslie pulled into the clinic's parking lot, surprised at the good time she'd made on her drive to work, even after she'd overslept and Terry had had to practically push her into the shower to wake her up (they really shouldn't have indulged in that second bottle of wine, she reflected). Traffic had been pretty light most of the way, allowing her a rare opportunity to hit the drive-thru at the Burger King on Shelby Place to pick up a croissanwich and a cup of coffee before easing back into the flow of cars, trucks and buses going in her direction. And to further brighten her day, WTAZ-FM over in Springfield had made their morning drive-time music mix a collection of megahits from the past three decades, which meant she could sing along with her favorite tunes.

The only bump in that particular road had come when she'd stopped for a red light and realized the driver of the car in the left-hand lane was watching her off-key rendition of "Bootylicious." He'd been pretty fine-looking, though, and seemed rather amused by her antics, instead of rolling his eyes or shaking his head as most of her friends did when she grabbed the microphone on Karaoke Friday Nights down at the Howling Wolf pub. Still, the flush of embarrassment had kept her from lowering her window to get his name or phone number and she'd peeled out and turned the corner in the opposite direction as soon as the light changed.

Well, at least she was going to see Terry again tonight.

"Morning, doctor," called a voice from behind her as she stepped from the car.

Leslie turned to find Rhonda walking toward her, pushing along one of those Vespa motorized scooters that had been so trendy in Europe for years before making their way to the States. From the exasperated look on the nurse's face, it was clear her trip to work hadn't been quite as enjoyable as the doctor's.

It matched Leslie's expression, now that the thousand pound weight had resettled in her stomach. She'd been afraid of this, of running into Rhonda before the meeting with Marks and Gruber, but there was no avoiding it now. The only option left to her was to somehow muddle through this conversation without giving any hints about the unpleasant business to come later in the day and then break away for her office at the first lull.

Running and hiding, she thought. Yeah, that's a great strategy, Leslie.

"Good morning, Rhonda," she replied evenly. She gestured toward the scooter. "Having some trouble with your ride?"

"Ahh, the damn thing ran out of gas about three blocks back," Rhonda grumbled as she pulled to a stop. "Forgot to fill the tank on my way back home last night. Thought I had enough to make the round trip one more time at least." She smiled tightly. "Guess I outsmarted myself, huh?"

"Ever think about buying a car?" Leslie asked. "You'd get more miles to the gallon out of it than your scooter. Besides, it must get pretty cold when you're riding around in the middle of winter."

Rhonda shrugged. "It's no big deal. I'm used to Chicago winters, and I bundle up so much I look like the Michelin Man on a moped." She jerked a thumb in the direction from which she'd come. "I only live a couple of miles south of here, anyway."

Leslie's eyebrows rose. "You live Downtown?" How could a nurse manage that on *her* salary, she wondered? It would certainly explain why she didn't have a car. She probably couldn't afford to own one with the rents in that area.

Rhonda nodded. "Uh-huh. And let me tell you, trying to find parking around there can be a real pain in the ass. You'd think it was an SUV dealership, there are so many of the things blocking the streets and taking up the good spaces." She patted the handlebars of

the Vespa. "But with this baby, all I have to do is chain it up to a couple of pipes in the alley next to my apartment building. I don't even have to feed a meter."

"Sounds very convenient," Leslie agreed. She knew exactly what Rhonda was talking about, considering the ridiculous monthly parking fees she had to pay her own building's management, just so she wouldn't have to spend half the evening looking for a place to put her convertible at the end of a work day. Another year or two, and she'd wind up having paid more for her reserved spot than she had for the car itself!

She grabbed her knapsack and breakfast from the front seat, locked the door and accompanied Rhonda across the parking lot. The nurse rolled the Vespa up to a tree close to the MMA entrance and pulled a large, thick-linked chain from the saddlebag that rested across the back of the seat. With quick, well-practiced movements, she wrapped the chain around the tree trunk, then looped it through the rear tire of the scooter. A heavy padlock, also taken from the saddlebag, held the chain in place, and made sure no potential thief would be going for a joyride with this particular vehicle, even if there *had* been gas in the tank.

"So," Rhonda asked with a sly smile, "any devil kids on the agenda for today?"

"You're not still annoyed about Kerry Anderson, are you?" Leslie asked. That's just wonderful, she thought with a grimace. A nurse holding a grudge against a little kid whose mother is already looking for the head of the "monster" who scared her baby. Maybe Dr Marks was right to be concerned. "That's not a very professional attitude, you know."

"Yeah, well, kids and I have never really gotten along," Rhonda said with a hint of regret in her voice. "That's why I never got assigned to the pediatric ward at County General." She shrugged. "Guess I just don't have that 'mothering instinct' women are supposed to possess. Although I don't think I could ever *warm* up to snotty little brats like that Anderson kid."

Oh, boy, Leslie thought.

"The Kerry Andersons of the world should be your biggest problem," she countered sagely. "Unfortunately, there are a lot of difficult *adult* patients out there who can cause you all sorts of trouble."

Rhonda eyed her closely. "You sound like you're saying that out of experience."

Leslie couldn't help but smile. "Oh, I am, Nurse Harrington. I am. Stick around here long enough, and you'll find out for yourself."

At half past nine, the Ride From Hell finally came to an end, as agonizingly slow at its conclusion as it had been at its start.

The limousine pulled up in front of Marks Medical Associates and Harry practically leapt from the back seat as he threw open the car door. He tossed a handful of bills at Mr Spenser with an "s"—enough to pay for the ride, but not enough to provide any sort of reward for the chauffeur's slug-like driving skills—and hurried inside the building, clutching his overnight bag to his chest. With any luck, there still might be time to find a way to reverse his condition.

"Why, good morning, Mr Raditch," the receptionist said once she spotted him approaching. "How can I..." The smile faltered, then collapsed entirely as Harry stormed right past her. He couldn't waste precious seconds on meaningless pleasantries. "Mr Raditch, wait!" she called after him.

He continued down the hallway that led to the examination rooms, not bothering to spare a glance at the movie one-sheets lining the walls. He'd seen them all before and still wondered how a man with such questionable taste in film as Dr Marks could hold a degree in anything.

Well, never you mind that now, he told himself. You have more important concerns to address.

He was just about to pass the nurse's station and make the turn into Dr Coburn's office when a human blockade appeared in his path.

"Excuse me, sir," she said. "Can I help you?"

Harry stared at her for a few moments. She was rather pretty, in a plain sort of way, a "bottle blonde" with the naturally brown roots of her shoulder-length hair still showing underneath. He imagined the contrast of light and dark made her think she looked fashionable; had he the time, he would have been delighted to set her straight on that point.

"You're new," he commented. Then his gaze lowered to the slim identification badge pinned to her uniform. "R... N..." he read slowly, then looked back up. "No, you can not help me," he stated bluntly. "I need Dr Coburn. Immediately."

The nurse frowned. "Dr Coburn is busy with an appointment—"

"This is an emergency!" Harry bellowed. Didn't this idiot of a nurse realize the importance of his visit?

Apparently, she didn't, because instead of stepping aside to let him pass, she folded her arms across her chest and stood her ground. "Listen, mister," she said in a warning tone, "either you get back in the waiting room and sit there until you're called, or you're going to have a real emergency."

"Was that a threat?" Harry snapped. "Are you threatening me, Nurse..." he looked at the badge again, "Harrington? What happened to the Hippocratic Oath?"

Her eyes seemed to flash with growing anger. "I must have left my copy of it in my other uniform." Her lips drew back in a tight, false smile. "Maybe you can write it down for me while you're *sitting in the waiting room*."

Leslie had only made it halfway through her breakfast when the sound of raised voices filtered under her closed door. The first voice she recognized instantly: Rhonda's, rising sharply in volume as she tried to take command of whatever argument she was currently involved in, probably with yet another patient. The second voice was a little harder to identify: male, apparently, but it, too, was moving up the scale to a nasally whine. One that became increasingly familiar as the verbal struggle continued.

"Oh, God," Leslie moaned. "Not Harry Raditch."

She dropped the croissanwich on her desk and wiped her hands and mouth on a paper napkin. The old saying was true, it seemed: "Speak of the Devil, and he will appear." Harry's ears must have been metaphorically burning when she'd alluded to difficult adult patients during her conversation with Rhonda in the parking lot. And that, in turn, must have automatically drawn him to her office, no doubt to regale her with stories of his latest medical complications. Exactly what those might be, she hadn't a clue; she'd been under the impression that, at one point or another over the years, Harry must have "contracted" just about every disease and infection known to man. Maybe he'd come down with something new, if such a thing were possible.

Leslie sighed. She hadn't seen Harry in some time, but a part of her mind had always warned her the time would come when he'd turn up again. And now, oh happy day, that hour had arrived. Slowly, she rose from her seat and headed for the door. If she was lucky, she considered, there might still be time to prevent Rhonda and Harry from tearing into one another like wild animals.

"More like Godzilla and Mothra," she muttered as she reached for the doorknob.

"Sir," the nurse said, "I understand you need to see Dr Coburn, but if you don't calm down this instant, the only person you're going to see is the sheriff."

Harry didn't know what to say; he just stood there, slack-jawed. He'd come here in need of urgent medical attention, and this... this *harridan* was threatening him with the police? What kind of a caregiver was she?

"N-now, see here—" he began to say.

"No, you see here!" she snapped.

And then Dr Coburn was at her side, placing a gentle hand on the nurse's shoulder. "I'll take care of this, Rhonda," she said quietly.

The nurse turned her head toward the physician, but Harry couldn't tell whether the look she gave her superior was one of surprise at having been caught acting disrespectfully toward a patient or one that made it clear she resented the intrusion. Either way, she quickly adopted a more submissive attitude, dropping her gaze as she nodded her head in agreement.

"I'll just go back to my filing," she said quietly. "Sorry about that, doctor."

"We'll talk about it later," Dr Coburn replied.

Harrington cut a quick glance at Harry, the fires of anger momentarily restoked behind her eyes; she looked ready to go another round with him. Then she spun about on her heel and stalked back to her station without so much as an apology. The nerve of the woman!

Dr Coburn leaned forward a little, dropping her voice to just above a whisper. "Harry, Rhonda's still fairly new here. At least try to be polite when you come barging into these offices without an appointment, okay?"

"Politeness is artificial good humor," Harry replied. "Thomas Jefferson." Coburn smiled pleasantly at him, but it was clear from the confused look in her eyes that she had no idea what he was talking about. Harry sighed. "I'll be in Room Three," he said huffily. "Time is of the essence."

Tightly clutching the handles of his bag, he stomped off down the hallway toward the last door on the right.

As soon as the door to Exam Three had closed, Rhonda slipped back out from behind the desk of the nurse's station and lightly stepped over to join Leslie.

"So, who's Mr Personality?" she asked in a hushed tone.

Leslie sighed dramatically. "Harry Raditch. I inherited him from Dr Marks."

Rhonda's eyes widened in surprise. "You do something to piss off Marks?"

"No. I just think Harry burned him out, and he couldn't handle it anymore." Leslie shook her head wearily and lowered her voice. "You see, Harry is a proud member of the Disease of the Month Club."

It was immediately evident that it was taking Rhonda's brain a few seconds to process the remark as a humorous comment. Leslie grimaced; she never *had* been much good at telling jokes without having to explain them. "You mean he's a hypochondriac?" the nurse finally asked.

Leslie grunted. "That's putting it mildly." She glanced toward Exam Three, to make sure Harry wasn't watching them, then motioned for Rhonda follow her. "Let me show you something."

She led Rhonda into her office and pulled open the top drawer of the filing cabinet just inside the doorway, a drawer labeled "HARRY RADITCH"; no other patients were listed. Inside were hanging folders filled to bursting with equally overburdened manila file folders, each identified by colorful labels listing various diseases and the dates they were "contracted." There were lots of diseases, lots of dates.

"Busy man," Rhonda commented sarcastically. "This a hobby for him, or a full-time occupation?"

"He's a textbook case," Leslie explained. "Tuberculosis as a child and..." She shrugged. "I guess he just got used to all the attention."

Rhonda whistled softly. "How do you treat him?"

"Harry's never manifested any real symptoms, so Dr Marks suggested I give him a placebo, like he used to." Leslie smiled and winked. "He has a remarkable recovery rate."

"Dr Coburn?" sniped an all-too-familiar voice from down the hall. "If you're done consulting with your... help, I'd appreciate a few moments of your time. If it's not too much of a bother."

Leslie sighed and closed the cabinet drawer. "Be right there, Harry."

He was sitting on the edge of the examination table when she entered the room, still fully dressed, still wearing his sunglasses. He

held onto the bag on his lap like it was a life preserver. The best course of action, as Leslie knew from experience, was to act nonchalant, ease her way into finding out the details of his latest "emergency." Besides, having not treated Harry for some time, she'd fallen out of practice in dealing with hypochondriacs.

"So, Harry, what seems to be the problem today?" She consulted the chart Rhonda had pulled together in a hurry. "I haven't seen you in—"

"Five months and three days," Harry replied. "I'd come down with encephalitis from a mosquito that bit me."

Leslie glanced at him without raising her head, then smiled. A mosquito bite in the dead of winter, that had been a new one. Harry was becoming more creative with his illnesses with every visit. "That sounds about right." She lowered the chart. "So, business has been good, then? Still running that bookstore?"

"Yes, yes, it's all online now," Harry explained sharply. He paused, then grimaced. "I... I hate to be curt with you, Doctor, but I really don't have time for our normal chit-chat."

"And why is that?" Leslie asked. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him so agitated. He'd taken last summer's bout of "lyme disease" with far greater calm.

"It's... well, it's difficult to explain, Dr Coburn." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I... I'm hoping you'll tell me it's all in my head."

That sort of outright admission certainly took Leslie by surprise, and she knew she couldn't keep it from showing on her face. Harry, however, didn't seem to notice. "Well... that's a big step for you, Harry. Why don't you tell me your symptoms?"

Harry barked a short, derisive laugh. "Words do not do them justice."

He removed his sunglasses and although Leslie had seen quite a few disturbing things in her short time as a doctor, she couldn't help but gasp at the sight of an eyeball gone entirely blood red.

"Looks like you've ruptured a blood vessel in your sclera," she said. "Have you had any trauma to your eye?"

Harry shook his head. "Unfortunately, my eye is only the tip of the iceberg."

That was the instant when she realized that, while she'd been discussing Harry's medical history with Rhonda, he'd helped himself to a scalpel from one of the instrument drawers. Leaving a patient unattended in a medical facility, giving him access to potentially dangerous equipment, how stupidly trusting could she be? The man believed he was a magnet for diseases, for God's sake!

"Harry!" Leslie cried. "What are you doing?"

Before she could grab for the scalpel, he'd already put it to use, poking the razor-sharp point of the blade into the ball of his left thumb. A vision of what could have been a brilliant medical career, suddenly crashing down in flames, momentarily filled her thoughts as she watched blood spurt from Harry's self-inflicted wound.

"Look at this!" he cried. "It won't clot. It's another symptom! I could bleed to death!"

She grabbed the instrument out of his hand and set it on a counter far from his reach. "Put some pressure on that cut," she ordered him. "You're not helping me if you're just going to stand there bleeding onto the floor."

Harry wisely shut his mouth and did as he was told, squeezing the thumb between the index finger and thumb of his right hand to stem the flow. It didn't seem to be working, however; a thin stream of blood continued to flow down his hand to stain the cuff of his shirt.

Moving to another drawer, Leslie pulled out a roll of sterile gauze and a dispenser of waterproof cloth tape. She carried them back to the examination table and set about wrapping a bandage around the wound. For such a small cut, its clotting factor certainly was taking its time; already, she could see a dark stain forming through the bandage. "We'll get this under control," she calmly assured her patient, "then I want to run some tests—"

"Wait!" Harry interjected. "I haven't even shown you the worst of it."

Oh, Lord, she thought. What could be worse than this?

She got the answer to that question as Harry pulled his shirt out of his pants and lifted it up to reveal large, black, sub-dermal lumps on

his chest.

"Oh, my God!" Leslie whispered.

They formed a pattern of sorts just beneath the top layer of skin, splayed out like decorative paving stones in an English garden from his collarbone to the base of his abdomen. Hesitantly, Leslie stepped forward to give them a closer look.

"When did these first appear?" she asked.

"This morning," he replied. "But my chest started itching yesterday, long before they formed. I thought all the scratching I did last night would drive me crazy."

"So why didn't you come in when the first symptoms became evident?"

"I..." Harry's voice trailed off, and he had to take a moment to pull himself together. "I was afraid no one would believe me." He frowned. "My unpleasant experiences with Dr Marks made it very clear that not everyone in this practice wants to be bothered by sick people."

Leslie allowed that to sink in before she answered him. "Is that how you feel about me, Harry? Have I ever given you the impression that I don't care what happens to you?"

He blushed and stared at his hands. "Well... no, Doctor. You've always played fair with me and I appreciate that." He looked up at her. "I apologize for listing you among the... charlatans I've had to put up with in my lifetime."

Leslie smiled. "Apology accepted... as long as you promise not to go stabbing yourself again to get my attention."

Harry chuckled. "It's a deal."

"Glad to hear it." Leslie stepped over to one of the equipment cabinets and selected a magnifying glass from one of the shelves. "Now that that's settled, let's take a look at this thing." She leaned close to her patient, using the glass to give her a better view of the hardened lumps of flesh.

"Ever seen anything like it?" Harry asked.

"Well..." In truth, she hadn't, nor had she ever heard of any viral symptoms even remotely related to what Harry had shown her this day. And something told her she wasn't about to find any helpful

articles about similar cases of this bizarre infection listed in the stacks of the medical journals in her office. "Uh... no, Harry," she finally said as she stood up straight. "I have to admit, it's a complete mystery to me."

His eyes were wide with fear, and his body shook a little. "That's what I was afraid of," he moaned softly.

SIX

There was a lot to be afraid of, as Leslie soon came to realize. Not because she couldn't make a proper diagnosis of Harry's ailment, but because she couldn't find any reason for it to exist.

With Rhonda's assistance, she drew a number of vials of Harry's blood for analysis, then ran him through the typical battery of tests: temperature, blood pressure, heart rate; checks of his ears and throat for infection and his lungs for any build-up of fluids. All appeared to be within normal range. She took an incisional biopsy sample from one of the lumps on his chest, the only time he got squeamish about all the attention he was getting, even though the local anesthetic she gave him ensured he wouldn't feel a thing. She used a scalpel to cut away a small piece of the tissue, then placed it in a specimen jar and instructed Rhonda to send it and some of the blood samples to the outside laboratory MMA used for their in-depth testing.

Oddly, though, slicing away at the lump didn't cause any bleeding at all. Even though she'd had to cut through the top layer of skin. That should have been an impossibility, given the veritable fountain that had started pumping from Harry's finger when he'd pricked it earlier. Why would one area of his body bleed so profusely, and not another? It was almost like the disease was being selective in the way it responded to outside stimuli.

"Very strange," Leslie muttered.

She ran what blood work she could, peered at the unusual formation of red cells under a microscope, checked and re-checked the results available to her, and wished for the hundredth time that it didn't have to take twenty-four hours for the lab to run its analysis. But it did, and it would, and as mom used to say, if wishes were horses...

She sat back from the 'scope lenses, rubbed bleary eyes, and picked up the printout of results. She looked them over again, as though they might have changed in the last five minutes, but they were still as frustratingly obtuse as before. "This makes no sense," she said testily. "But why don't they make sense?"

Staring into space, letting her thoughts slam around in her head like bumper cars—momentarily fun to imagine, but thoroughly useless in helping her figure things out—didn't seem to improve her situation. And it would be a long twenty-four hours if all she did while waiting for the lab results was sit around and try to will the clock on the wall to move faster. No, she decided, what she needed was a fresh perspective, an outside party who could look at the bigger picture, rather than get bogged down in all the minutiae she'd found herself trapped under.

It was time to talk to Dr Marks. Now if she could just find a way to consult with him without having to divulge the identity of her patient.

He was in the process of taking off his lab coat and slipping into his suit jacket when she arrived at his office. She knocked on the doorframe. "Dr Marks—"

"Leslie! Just who I was about to go looking for!" He gestured her into the room. "Get this: Bill Underwood, the Director at County General, calls me about an 'emergency' fifteen minutes ago, says he desperately needs my help." He dramatically rolled his eyes. "He asked me to speak at an AMA luncheon today."

"Congratulations," she said with a smile. "What's the topic?"

"Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome," he replied.

"SARS? I didn't think you were an expert on that," she commented.

"I'm not, but it seems I am the only physician in two hundred miles who's actually read through all the case studies inside and out." He shrugged. "It's a last minute thing. I wasn't even supposed to attend it, but their guest lecturer from the Center for Disease Control came down with the flu yesterday. Ironical, huh?" He shook his head. "Like I said yesterday: it's a nasty bug going around."

"But one with an impeccable sense of timing, it seems," she added.

Marks grunted, apparently agreeing with her. "Anyway, I won't be back until three and Dr Gruber is still tied up with that... other

business." That was code for the deposition Tony was giving at the courthouse in a malpractice suit. Nothing to do with the practice, thankfully, but with a botched gall bladder operation at McDuffie Memorial Hospital in Springfield. Gruber had referred a patient there and now had to testify as to the skill of the surgeon being sued. He'd probably be gone for most of the day, if not the entirety of it.

"Think you can hold the fort while we're out?" Marks asked.

Leslie nodded. "Of course, but..." She let her voice trail off.

"But?" Marks prompted.

She glanced around to see if anyone was close enough to listen to their conversation. "What about the meeting?"

He looked perplexed. "Meeting?"

"About Rhonda," she whispered.

"Oh, that meeting," he replied softly. "Walk me out."

They headed down the hall, past the nurse's station, where Rhonda gave a brief nod to acknowledge them. "Doctors," she said politely before heading into Exam Three, where Harry was waiting for Leslie to return.

"Any ideas on what we should do?" she asked Marks.

The doctor shook his head. "I have to admit, I didn't really give it much thought last night. My oldest son, Jeff, came home from college yesterday on spring break, so Melanie and I threw him a little dinner party." He smiled. "Finally got to meet that girlfriend he's been hiding from us for the past three months. Annabelle. Beautiful girl. Majors in journalism."

The mention of college and reporting immediately made Leslie think of Terry. She could understand Marks's point of view. She'd also been distracted last night by things other than worries about Rhonda Harrington's employment future.

"Is there anything else going on that I should be aware of?" he asked as they walked past the reception desk.

She paused, looking at the printout of test results in her hand. It was embarrassing to come right out and say it, but... "Umm... yes. I'm having trouble diagnosing one of my patients."

Marks nodded pleasantly to Mrs Horowitz, who waved to him from across the waiting room. "What sort of trouble?" he asked

quietly.

"I'm not exactly sure," Leslie replied, wincing at how that admission must sound. It made her feel like she was back in med school, waiting for one of her professors to give her a ten-minute lecture on the dangers of uncertainty. "Based on his system's apparent inability to form clots after receiving a cut, at first I thought it was a blood disorder, maybe Idiopathic Thrombocytopenic Purpura, or even von Willebrand disease, but—"

"What's the platelet count?" he cut in.

She handed him the printout as they walked through the main doors and exited the building. "That's the thing," she explained. "His platelet count's high, but his prothrombin and PTT are both normal. He shouldn't have a clotting problem."

Marks's lips curled in a half-frown as he scanned the report. He seemed to be as puzzled as she was by the results. "Patient history?"

Leslie grimaced. Here it comes, she thought. The one question I was hoping he wouldn't ask. "Actually, it's Harry Raditch."

Marks came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the sidewalk. "Oh, for heaven's sake!" He glared at his young associate. "Leslie, what do we know about hypochondriacs?"

Leslie nodded. "I'm well aware of it, Dr Marks, but this time he's exhibiting actual symptoms."

"You treat the mind, not the body," Marks continued, verbally stomping on her argument. "Besides, aren't there other patients more deserving of your time?"

"I know, I know," Leslie admitted. "But besides the blood anomaly, he's got some very unusual skin masses. The biopsy hasn't revealed anything yet—"

"It's probably just a psychosomatic manifestation," Marks interjected. "He's had them before; they're listed in his case files."

"I checked," Leslie replied. "But I couldn't find any psychosomatic reaction he'd experienced that came anywhere close to this one."

Marks shrugged. "My advice is, refer him to a psychiatrist." He glanced at his watch. "I really have to go." He handed the printout back to her.

That wasn't a good enough consultation for her, however. She kept pace with him as he walked across the parking lot to his car. "But isn't it possible that he's actually contracted something real?" she insisted.

"Possible, but not probable." Marks paused, scratched his chin in thought. "Tell you what: run some more tests if it'll make you feel better. But don't get overly ambitious and start scheduling high-end work-ups for our Mr Raditch, not unless you're willing to pay for them, Doctor. We do operate this facility under a limited budget, you understand."

"I understand," Leslie said. "Thank you, Dr Marks."

Marks unlocked the car and opened the driver's side door. "If you want to thank me, Leslie, you'll find a way to discharge him before I get back from this luncheon, all right?"

"Yes, Dr Marks," she said, then watched as he drove away. Deep down inside, though, she knew she was lying. Harry Raditch wasn't going anywhere until she'd run as many tests on him as she could to get to the bottom of this medical mystery. Putting aside his considerable history as a hypochondriac, there was something seriously wrong with him this time. She just wished she could figure out what that "something" was.

Rhonda came out from the nurse's station to meet her as she returned to her office.

"How's Harry?" Leslie asked.

"I gave him the desmopressin like you said," Rhonda said, "but his bleeding hasn't stopped. And his temperature's up to a hundred and one." She leaned in close, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone. "But to be honest with you, Doctor, it's his attitude that's going to get him killed, if you know what I mean."

Leslie raised an eyebrow. Well, she thought wryly, isn't that a case of the pot calling the kettle black, as Dad used to say.

"You know, Rhonda," she said, trying to sound serious, "if you keep talking like that, I'll have to tell the police about these

conversations if Harry winds up dead under mysterious circumstances."

Rhonda grunted. "No jury would ever convict me. It'd be justifiable homicide."

"Well, I'll see what I can do to work things out between you two before it has to come to that," Leslie promised. "With luck, you'll be the best of friends in no time."

Rhonda rolled her eyes. "Oh, happy day!"

Leslie frowned. For a woman whose head appeared to be on the chopping block, Rhonda didn't seem to be the least bit affected by her discussion yesterday with Dr Marks about her behavior. Unless, that is, they'd never had that discussion.

Inwardly, she sighed. That would be just like Dr Marks: to make declarative statements about how things needed to be done in the offices one minute and then push them from his thoughts and completely forget about them the next. If Rhonda was still as sharp-tongued and impatient as she'd been before Leslie and Marks had spoken, then he'd not only forgotten about their talk during his son's homecoming party last night, he'd no doubt let it slip from his mind before he left the office at the end of the day. Typical.

"I'd better go check on Harry," she said, and headed down the corridor without waiting for a response. She didn't know what was annoying her more at this point: Marks singling her out for interrogation about Rhonda's attitude and then apparently developing short-term memory problems, or the aggravating itch she'd developed on her chest.

When she arrived at Exam Three, she stopped in the doorway to watch Harry's actions. He'd placed the overnight bag on the examination table and was carefully rummaging through his belongings. He pulled out a dark blue blanket sealed in a large ziplock bag, set it down on the table, then followed it with a miniature travel pillow, a small air purifier and a sterilized collapsible drinking cup.

"Planning on staying a while, Harry?" Leslie asked mischievously.

Raditch glared at her through scared, angry eyes. "With what little time I have left, Doctor, I'd rather not spend it being mocked, if you

don't mind."

"You know I'd never do that," she replied.

He stopped with his fussing and turned to look at her. His stern expression became an apologetic one. "Yes," he answered softly. "Yes, I do know that. And I want to say how sorry I am for my rude behavior."

Leslie shrugged. "No harm, no foul. In your position, with the strange illness you're suffering from, I might have acted the same way." She paused. "Listen, we need to get that cut sealed up."

He sighed dramatically, put the bag on the floor, and hopped up onto the table.

Leslie opened a drawer in the cabinet closest to the door and extracted a package of fresh bandages and a tube of Dermabond, a medical glue used in place of stitches. She placed the items and a bottle of rubbing alcohol on the table beside Harry, then fetched a new pair of disposable latex gloves from a box on the counter. He held up his finger; she could see fresh blood on the bandage.

"All right," she said calmly, "let's see what we have here..."

Gently, she loosened the tape strips holding the non-adhesive bandage in place and pulled back the edge. Blood was still welling around the cut.

"You haven't been taking a lot of aspirin or any other blood-thinners lately, have you, Harry?" she asked as she set about cleaning the area again.

"I have not," he replied, staring almost hypnotically at the blood as it flowed down his finger.

Using her thumb and forefinger, she squeezed the edges of the cut together, just enough to staunch the bleeding, and applied the Dermabond. Just for good measure, she rewrapped the finger in fresh bandages. "You'll be glad to know my initial tests didn't turn up anything." Her second big lie of the day, she realized. First to her business partner, now to her patient. At the rate she was going, she'd be able to convince herself everything was fine and Harry was one hundred percent healthy even before the test results came back from the lab.

"Of course not," he said pointedly. "Everything's playing out exactly as I feared."

"You are running a fever, however, from what Nurse Harrington tells me," she said, putting the finishing touches on her work. "Have you been out of the country recently?"

He laughed sharply. "That might actually be funny, Doctor, if you weren't so tragically off the mark."

Leslie gritted her teeth. These games he was playing were really starting to get on her nerves. Maybe she'd been a tad too optimistic in thinking she could smooth out the differences between Harry and Rhonda. If he kept annoying Leslie, she might have to start siding with the abrasive nurse.

"I've wanted to travel to some exotic locale for as long as I can remember," he was saying wistfully. "Budapest, Zanzibar, Mozambique..." He sighed and shook his head forlornly. "But I was always too afraid of picking up some rare disease." A wry smile flickered across his face. "I'm afraid the only flights I've ever taken are those of fancy."

"You have to take some risks in life, Harry," Leslie said. "I mean, with that kind of fearful attitude, shouldn't you be concerned about picking up something just walking down to the corner pharmacy?"

Harry chuckled bitterly. "I'm already two steps ahead of you there, Doctor. The sad truth is, I rarely even leave the house anymore—the advantage of owning an online bookstore, you see. Mrs Mendolsohn, my housekeeper, she does all my—"

He froze in mid-sentence, mouth still hanging open.

"Harry?" Leslie said. From the rigid position of his body and limbs, she was concerned that some new symptom of his mysterious disease was now making itself known.

He suddenly sat up on the table. "Oh, no. Mrs Mendolsohn." He turned to Leslie, fear coloring his cheeks a brighter shade of red. "What if I've given her the virus? What if she spreads it?" He yelped, eyes bulging from his head. "Good God, the Bubonic Plague started like this!"

Leslie placed her hands firmly on his shoulders, guiding him back to a reclining position. "Harry, please, calm down. We don't know

this is a virus. It could be nothing more than an allergic reaction. I just need to run a few more tests, but we will find a way to cure this, whatever it is."

"All right... all right..." Harry replied, his breathing slowing to normal.

She removed her hands and eyed him warily. "Are you going to be okay?" she asked.

Harry nodded and flashed an insecure smile. "I'll be fine, Doctor. Sorry for losing my head like that. Sometimes my imagination runs a little wild."

"Well, see what you can do about controlling that, okay?" she gently chided him. "I need you to have a clear head if we're going to find a way to beat this thing. No flights of fancy on this trip." She patted him gently on the hand. "I'll be back in a little while to see how you're doing, and then we can discuss what we should do with you. I don't want to risk sending you to County General until we know what we're dealing with. We might have to set you up in here overnight. Just until the test results come back from the lab."

Oh, yes, she thought ruefully. That news should go over well with Dr Marks when he gets back from his luncheon.

"Whatever you think is best, Dr Coburn," Harry said.

She nodded. "Good. I'll talk to Nurse Harrington about setting up a cot. It'll be a little more comfortable than the exam table."

As she headed for the door, Harry blurted out, "Doctor, there's something you should know."

She stopped in the hallway and turned around. "Yes?"

There was a look that passed across his eyes, as though there was something he wanted to say, but was afraid to do so; it darkened his expression, made him nervously shift around on the examination table. He picked at a piece of lint on his pant leg.

"Harry?" Leslie urged.

"Your optimism," Harry said with a plastered-on smile that looked like it would be more at home on a mannequin than a human being. "It's contagious."

Leslie gazed at him suspiciously for a moment. "Riiight." Flashing him a smile that she hoped looked warm instead of forced—she'd

never had to spend this much time with Harry before and it was starting to become a chore—she turned and made a beeline for her office. Her feet were starting to ache and that itch on her chest was really beginning to annoy the hell out of her.

With any luck, she thought, the lab results tomorrow would prove that her optimism was the only thing that was contagious.

SEVEN

Unfortunately, Collin Marks proved to be immune to that particular contagion. When he returned to the offices after giving his speech at the AMA luncheon and spotted Harry setting up house in Exam Three, any good will he might have been feeling quickly faded. He stormed into Leslie's office and closed the door.

"Would you care to tell me what the hell Harry Raditch is still doing here?" he demanded.

Leslie glanced up from her computer screen with bleary eyes. She'd just spent the better part of two hours searching medical websites, trying to find any reports on cases that might be similar to Harry's. It was the proverbial needle-in-a-haystack situation and it was starting to stress her out, to the point where it took her addled brain a couple of seconds to recognize the red-faced man standing in front of her desk.

"Oh, hi, Dr Marks," she said, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. "How did it—"

He pointed an accusatory finger at her. "I thought we'd agreed before I left that you would discharge Raditch as soon as possible."

Oh, sure, she thought. He forgets about the meeting over Rhonda's behavior, but he remembers telling me to throw the hypochondriac out on his ear.

"Actually, Dr Marks, I'm just following your advice," she replied with a tiny smile. She wasn't going to sit through another of his interrogations two days in a row.

His brow furrowed. "What advice was that?"

"To 'run more tests if it'll make me feel better.'" She held up the printout she'd shown him earlier. "Since mine were inconclusive, I've ordered a CBC, biopsy, platelet aggregation, Ristocetin Cofactor and D-dimer."

Marks folded his arms across his chest and frowned. "I thought you'd already ruled out blood disorders."

"I might have been too hasty," she admitted. "From everything I've seen so far, he doesn't appear to have contracted any viruses, at least

none that show up immediately. We'll have the lab results in the morning, though."

Marks jerked a thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of Exam Three. "And you just plan on letting Harry turn one of our examination rooms into a hotel suite while we wait for those results?"

Leslie shrugged. "I didn't think it prudent to either let him take his chances getting home or transfer him to County General; not until we know what it is he has." She flashed an optimistic smile; it bounced harmlessly off his gruff shell. "It's just overnight, Dr Marks. Once the results are in, we'll be able to make a proper diagnosis. And then Harry will be out of our hair, ready to make a nuisance of himself all over again next month."

Marks grunted; clearly he didn't believe that for an instant. And really, who would know Harry better than the physician who had cared for him for over a decade? Still, she had to keep her hopes up. Light at the end of the tunnel and all that. It helped keep her mind off the fact that she was completely stumped by what she was facing.

"And do you also plan on keeping him company tonight?" Marks asked.

Leslie started. "What?"

"Well, someone has to stay with him," he replied, with just a hint of triumph in his voice. "And since we don't stay open after the close of business hours and he's your patient..."

"But..." Leslie said softly. "But I had plans for tonight..."

"Then you'd better cancel them," Marks said with a smile that bore no trace of warmth. "You're going to be otherwise engaged."

Terry had been far more understanding than she would have been when she called to cancel their dinner date. Just one more reason why he seemed like Mr Perfect.

"Hey, these things happen, Lee," he said. "Just like we talked about last night."

She sighed. "Another glamorous day in the life of Super Woman, huh?"

He chuckled. "You wouldn't have it any other way, and you know it."

She laughed. "You're right."

"Well, don't worry about it. I'm not heading back to Chicago until the day after tomorrow. We can always shoot for dinner tomorrow night."

"I'd like that." She closed her eyes and crossed her fingers. Please don't let anything happen to screw it up, she thought.

"Then it's a date," Terry said. She could almost see the smile on his face. "It's probably a good thing we're taking the night off anyway. It'll give me a chance to go over my notes and start working on the first draft of the article. In the meantime, you go take care of that patient. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"All right, Terry," Leslie said. "Good night."

She felt that old tingle again as she hung up the phone. Not even Harry Raditch could weaken the grin that lit up her features. At least that was the promise she made to herself.

It was certainly a challenge to keep that promise as the hours dragged on toward the start of business the next morning. When Harry wasn't moaning and groaning his way through the night, and Leslie wasn't exhausting herself with fruitless Internet searches for those impossible-to-find medical reports she knew had to be out there somewhere, he wanted to strike up a conversation. Problem was, the two of them had nothing in common and no similar interests. They didn't read the same books, didn't watch the same movies, didn't listen to the same music. For all intents and purposes, he was the blind date from hell, boring her with anecdotes about the "joys" of collecting and the "fascinating" ins and outs of the book industry, making snide comments about her choice of summer reading. They couldn't even agree on what sort of take-out they should have for dinner: she wanted Chinese, he wanted Turkish.

They settled for vegetarian pizza. Actually, she settled; he just kept debating her choices until she finally gave in to his.

This, she realized, was why she never bothered to get into a deep conversation with him. If any man could ever make her feel like she wanted to grab an empty syringe and inject an air bubble into his vein that would be sure to kill him, that man was Harry Raditch.

Nevertheless, despite Leslie's homicidal thoughts, the rising sun found them both very much alive, although Harry's condition was continuing to deteriorate. Both eyes were now thoroughly bright red, as though the veins were bleeding into the scleras and there were more of the black lumps scattered across his body. Some had even started forming on his neck.

Around seven o'clock, the staff began trickling in. Kathy was the first to arrive, booting up the computers in reception and the nurse's station, then heading to the small kitchen behind the examination rooms to start up a fresh pot of ground coffee in order to replace the one Leslie had consumed during the night.

"Good morning, Dr Coburn," she said cheerfully, then leaned in close to whisper, "If you don't mind my saying so, you look like hell."

"Thanks, Kathy," Leslie replied sarcastically.

"How's Mr Raditch doing?"

"Resting, last I checked." Leslie sighed wearily. "He didn't fall sound asleep until five am, and by then..." She shrugged. "It was too late for me to try conking out on my couch."

Kathy shook her head. "You really need to get some sleep, doctor. It won't do you or your patients any good if you start nodding off in the middle of an examination."

Leslie nodded. "I know. I will, right after I find out what Harry's got, and then figure out what to do about it."

"And what if you can't figure that out?" Kathy asked.

The good doctor forced herself to smile. "Then I guess you better make the coffee extra strong, Kathy, 'cause I won't be sleeping for a while."

The test results came in around nine am, e-mailed directly to Leslie's computer from the laboratory. They made as little sense as her own had.

Biopsy: negative. CBC, biopsy, platelet aggregation, Ristocetin Cofactor, and D-dimer, all within normal levels, except for the elevated platelet count. It was as if the infection didn't exist. But she could see the external symptoms, had spent all night observing the effects of the disease as it continued to eat away at Harry's body. How, then, could it be undetectable to laboratory tests?

"Oh, I give up," she muttered.

She picked up a handbook she'd come across in her search through her office for medical journals and possible AMA updates. Emblazoned across the front of the pamphlet was "CENTER FOR CONTAGIOUS DISEASES—UPDATED US PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE GUIDELINES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF EXPOSURE TO CONTAGIONS". She flipped through the booklet and found a hotline number printed on the inside front cover; hesitantly, she picked up the phone and dialed.

The call was answered five rings in. "Good morning. Center for Contagious Diseases; this is Shelby. How can I help you?"

Leslie paused. Well, she thought, in for a penny, in for a pound, as dad would say. "Yes, hello, this is Dr Leslie Coburn, at Marks Medical Associates in Emerson, Illinois. I'd like to consult on a patient. It may be nothing, but I just want to be safe."

"Do you know the nature of the contagion?" the operator asked.

Leslie glanced once more at the results displayed on her computer screen. "Not exactly," she had to admit.

Her uncertainty didn't seem to faze the operator for a second. "Just a moment, doctor. I'll connect you with Dr Yordan, our Director of Evaluation and Research. Perhaps he might be able to assist you."

"Thank you." There was a small clicking sound as Leslie was placed on hold, no doubt so the operator could check on whether the caller was a real physician, and not some crank trying to masquerade as one, followed shortly by the sound of another phone ringing. It was picked up on the third ring.

"Good morning. This is Joe Yordan," said a male voice. "How can I help you, Dr Coburn?"

"Actually, Dr Yordan, I'm not quite sure," Leslie replied. "I have a patient here: white male, forty-five years of age, suffers from acute hypochondriasis—"

"Oh, boy," Yordan muttered.

"Yeah, that pretty much sums him up in my book, too," Leslie agreed with a small laugh. "However, it appears that this time he's actually gone and got himself seriously ill."

"Define 'seriously ill' for a hypochondriac, would you, Dr Coburn?" Yordan asked. She could sense from the suddenly bored tone of his voice that he was about two seconds away from wishing her well and hanging up the phone.

"How about an unidentifiable blood disorder?" she asked.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Go on..." he said slowly. All right, so that had gotten his attention, as she'd expected.

Leslie smiled. Try hanging up on me now, Mr Director.

"So, what are we dealing with?" he asked.

"Well, for starters, the PT and PTT are normal, and the platelet count is high, but the patient's clotting factor is completely out of whack."

Yordan chuckled. "'Out of whack.' Is that some new medical term I haven't heard about yet?"

Funny guy, Leslie thought sarcastically, with a roll of her eyes. She laughed politely and continued without commenting on the joke. "The biopsy I ordered came back negative, but the sub-dermal lesions that formed as one of the initial stages of the infection are plain as day and they're continuing to spread. Both eyes show signs of vascular hemorrhage, although the patient insists he hasn't suffered any ocular trauma."

Another pause. "Wow," was all Yordan said at first, then, "Those are some symptoms you've got there, Dr Coburn. Off the top of my head, I can't remember ever hearing about anything like you've just described."

"That's what I was afraid of," Leslie replied.

"I'm going to need as much information as you can provide, as soon as possible," the director instructed her.

She nodded, even though she knew he couldn't see her motions. "Well, I can e-mail you the lab results."

"That would be fine," Yordan replied. "We'll also need a full patient history faxed over."

Leslie gazed across the room at the filing cabinet containing Harry's medical records. She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. "That may take some time to pull together. It's a little... extensive."

"Then just the highlights to start with, Doctor," he said. "To give us something to compare against the test results."

"That should be no problem," Leslie said. "I'll have it sent over right after I forward the lab results to you." She accessed her online mailbox and opened a new file to compose her letter. "Can I have your e-mail address?"

E-mailing the results took only an eyeblink—a few clicks on the mouse and they were on their way to the CCD—in comparison to the time it took Leslie to compile the "highlights" of Harry's medical records. When one took into account the fact that most of his ailments were afflictions of the mind, not the immune system, it would seem the easiest of tasks to pull together a list of illnesses he'd actually suffered: the occasional cold, a bout of the flu, a touch of stomach cramps, for example. But it was tracking them down among the reams and reams of paper outlining each false sickness in the files that was the most time-consuming and the most frustrating part of the work. Not for the first time, Leslie grumbled about the inefficiency of Marks's filing system in the years before Dr Gruber had convinced him to go hi-tech and invest in some computers. By the time Leslie had joined the practice, MMA had not only transferred a great deal of their medical records to a shared database that both the doctors and nurses could access, but had their own

website up and running. And yet, even with all these advances, apparently no one had ever bothered to input Harry Raditch's files.

Well, Leslie thought, maybe it's for the best. With all the hundreds of pages of nonsense contained in the cabinet, scanning his stuff into the database probably would've overloaded the server.

Eventually, though, she managed to gather everything she thought the CCD might need, including some of the more exotic illnesses Harry had thought he'd had at some time or another. It still made for a thick pile of heavy reading.

She put the records in a folder and walked across the hallway to the nurse's station. Rhonda was engaged in filing other reports (whatever happened to all that talk of a "paperless office" that used to be all the rage in the business world, Leslie wondered?) while she idly scratched at a spot on her chest. She looked up as the doctor approached.

Leslie handed her the folder. "I need you to fax this to the CCD."

Rhonda's eyebrows rose almost to her hairline as she flipped through the pages. She looked back to Leslie. "You think he's got something real?"

Leslie grimaced. "As much as I hate to say it, he'd better have this time. Otherwise my credibility with Dr Marks will be shot to pieces."

Rhonda pulled the pages from the folder and arranged them in neat piles next to the fax machine that sat next to her telephone, stacks thin enough to feed through the rollers without jamming them. Her gaze skimmed across the top page. "So, this fruitcake—"

"Patient," Leslie corrected.

"He's a book dealer?" Rhonda continued without pause. She laughed sharply. "I can just imagine the kind of books he sells. Probably all the medical dictionaries and infectious disease encyclopedias he doesn't have anymore use for because he's already been tested for everything."

An idea suddenly struck Leslie. "What did you say?"

"What, about being tested for everything?"

She shook her head. "No, before that."

"You mean about the kind of books he sells?" Rhonda cocked her head to one side, looking confused. "Why? You think that's

important?"

Leslie scratched her chest and leaned against the counter. "It could be..." Her voice trailed off, and she fell silent.

Rhonda shrugged when it became clear she wasn't going to get a further explanation. "So what does this guy do when he isn't screaming about diseases and making a general pain in the ass of himself?"

"I've never had that deep a conversation with Harry," Leslie admitted. "Usually he comes in, complaining about his latest illness, I run some tests, give him a sugar pill or a B-12 shot to placate him and then I send him home. It doesn't take more than an hour and he spends the entire time talking about infections and the latest medical breakthroughs. She shrugged. "When your primary focus is to find a way to get a yammering hypochondriac out of your office as quickly as possible without upsetting him, the last thing you want to do is start a new conversation by asking what he does in his spare time."

"I hear that," Rhonda said sympathetically.

Leslie shook her head testily. "But it's not supposed to be like that. I shouldn't be rushing patients out of my office just because they annoy me. Harry does need treatment, it's just I can't do anything for him." She sighed. "Maybe that's what I find so frustrating about dealing with him. The kind of illness he suffers from is a little outside my area of expertise."

"You mean he needs a shrink," Rhonda said flatly.

Leslie frowned. "Are you always this blunt?"

Rhonda flashed a smile. "It's one of my more endearing qualities." She picked up the first stack of records and began feeding them into the fax machine. "So, what is it about him being a bookseller that got your attention?"

Leslie folded her arms across her chest and stared at a corner of the Formica table, gathering her thoughts. "I'm not sure," she replied slowly. "Something to do with a comment Harry made about traveling."

He'd dozed off in the time she'd been away. Unfortunately, as much as he needed the rest, getting some answers out of him was far more important.

She shook him gently by the shoulders. "Wake up, Harry."

"W-what?" Harry grumbled as he sleepily opened his eyes.

"You said you don't travel anymore, but you still must get books from all over the world by mail."

Harry flashed a lopsided grin. "You're getting warmer, Doctor, but you're still... light-years away from the truth."

Leslie placed her hands on his shoulders and leaned in close. "I don't have time for guessing-games, Harry. I didn't like them as a kid; I hate them even more as an adult. You're suffering from a disease I'm totally unfamiliar with and playing coy with me only wastes precious time." Her eyes narrowed. "Now, what are you not telling me?"

"I..." Harry's voice trailed off, and he turned his head away. Clearly, he was ashamed to speak the truth.

"Come on, Harry," Leslie said gently, releasing her hold. "I'm out on a limb here. Talk to me." She allowed a wisp of a smile to show through the professional veneer. "As cliched as it sounds, help me to help you."

Harry's jaw set, as though he was internally debating what he should do next. He turned to look at her. "All right," he finally said. "I'll tell you something, but you're not going to believe it."

"Let me be the judge of that," Leslie replied.

He nodded in agreement. "Could you hand me my bag?"

She glanced around and spotted the overnight bag in a corner of the room. When she picked it up, she discovered it was still open; inside were a toiletry kit, tissue packets, moistened sanitary towelettes, and a change of clothing. Clearly, Harry had been planning on an extended stay, most likely in anticipation of a transfer to County General. She placed the bag on the edge of the exam table as Harry levered himself into a sitting position. He reached inside and unzipped a pocket in the lining that had escaped her notice. From it he extracted a paperback book wrapped in a clear plastic bag.

"The answer to all of this is a book, as you suspected," Harry said. "Only not the way you think."

He held it up so she could get a look at the cover; automatically, she reached out to take it from him.

"No!" he snapped, yanking the book away from her. Then he saw the look of surprise on her face. "Sorry, Doctor. I just didn't want to risk the chance of... of..." His voice trailed off.

"Of what, Harry?" Leslie asked.

"Of spreading the infection."

"You mean you contracted whatever it is you have from touching this book?" It would certainly explain why he'd wrapped it in plastic.

"In a manner of speaking," he replied cryptically.

"Well, if it is the source of the virus, then I'm going to have to borrow it, Harry." She caught the fear that flashed in his eyes for a second, but was it because he was afraid of what might happen when it was unwrapped, or because he might have to sacrifice a valuable book in the name of science? "We'll need to run tests on it," she explained.

"I'm not sure that's necessary," he said slowly. So he was more concerned about the book than the potential for identifying his illness! Leslie couldn't believe it. Just what kind of hypochondriac was this man?

Well, she didn't have time to get into a drawn-out argument about the care and handling of some old paperback, not when she was grasping at straws to find a way to cure its owner. She walked over to the cabinets, pulled a fresh pair of latex gloves from their box and then opened a drawer to get a disposable surgical mask. She slipped the gloves on, adjusted the mask over her nose and mouth and went back to Harry. "This should keep me safe," she assured him, and held out her hand.

Reluctantly, he surrendered it.

Approaching the task with caution—and some nagging doubt that maybe she shouldn't be doing this without a full Hazardous Materials outfit—Leslie undid the strips of cellophane tape that sealed the bag closed and opened the thin plastic flap. Gingerly, she reached in and slid the book from its protective covering.

Well, nothing's happened so far, she thought. But she couldn't help noticing how Harry's eyes were fixed on the book, how he was nervously biting his lower lip, as though fearful that she might damage it by dropping it on its spine or by tearing a page.

She turned the book over in her hands, examining it for any sign of mold or mildew, anything that would possibly give her a clue as to where she could begin the next stage of her investigation. If the causative agent of Harry's disease could be tracked down to the water-dampened pages of an old novel...

But, no, the book was clean... or at least free of any potentially hazardous particulates that might have been visible. Certainly it had seen better days—the cover was creased along the bottom corner, the spine was a little cracked—but there was no evidence that it had been left lying around in somebody's musty basement for too many years. The only thing that could be considered dangerous about it was that it openly displayed the poor taste of its publisher in the choice of cover art. Did sexist images of half-naked women swooning in the arms of burly he-men actually sell books back then? Leslie shook her head. They'd never get away with something like that today.

She stared at the cover for a moment, then looked to her patient. "I don't get it. What is it you're trying to say about this book, Harry?"

Harry nodded, as though he'd expected her to have that reaction. "My virus," he muttered somberly. "It's not of this earth."

It took a couple of seconds for that comment to sink in. "I beg your pardon?" she finally asked. He couldn't really have said what she thought she'd heard, could he?

Harry swallowed hard; she could hear his Adam's apple bob up and down in his throat. "The cause of the infection," he said slowly, "is not of earthly origin."

Leslie could barely contain her surprise, or her anger. She yanked the mask down and waved the book at him. "Are you trying to tell me your virus is from the planet *Zebulon*?"

Harry shook his head. "No, it's from the book. The story." He pointed at the battered paperback. "Read the back cover."

"This is ridiculous," she snapped, and held out the book for him to take it back. Instead, he gestured at it again.

"Please," he said. "Just read it."

Leslie sighed. "All right!" She turned the book over and cleared her throat. "The mission to Zebulon takes a disastrous turn when crewmembers contract a hostile virus whose first-stage symptoms include uncontrollable bleeding and a strange pattern of black skin protrusions. Their only hope is to find an antidote, before the virus starts purging all the blood from the bodies of its victims."

She glanced at Harry. It was true he possessed the same symptoms, as bizarre a coincidence as could be, but to contract it from a book?

"This is a *fictional* virus, Harry," she concluded.

Harry emitted a short, high-pitched whine. "I said you wouldn't believe it."

"What *I* can't believe," Leslie said with a snarl, "is that I actually took you seriously this time." It came out sounding a lot more stern than she had intended, but she couldn't help it. He'd really pushed her over the edge this time, and she felt like an idiot. Dr Marks would never let her live this one down.

She turned on her heel and stormed out of the examining room, trying to ignore the horrified sob that tore its way out of Harry's throat as she slammed the door behind her.

The anger she felt hadn't lessened by the time she reached the nurse's station. She threw the book onto the counter, startling Rhonda, who was still feeding pages through the fax machine.

"You can stop doing that," Leslie told her. "I don't need to consult with the CCD."

"Change in prognosis?" the nurse asked.

"Something like that," Leslie replied bitterly. It took her a few seconds to come right out and say it, but she finally managed to force the words out of her mouth. "Harry made the whole damn thing up."

"Well, color me surprised," Rhonda drawled. Leslie stared coldly at her, and the nurse immediately broke eye contact. "Sorry," she muttered. She pulled the pages from the fax and then set about

collecting the rest of the scattered contents of the file. "So, his symptoms are psychosomatic?"

"Oh, it's even better than that," Leslie said sarcastically. She pointed to the novel. "He claims his virus came from that stupid book."

Rhonda froze then turned to warily eye the paperback. "You mean there's some kind of pathogen on it that made him sick when he touched it?"

"No," Leslie said curtly. He'd really made her blood boil with this nonsense, hadn't he? "I mean he thinks he contracted the space disease described in the book."

Now it was Rhonda's turn to look surprised—and confused. "How the hell would he do that?"

Leslie shrugged. "I don't know, and right now I don't care." She picked up the phone and started dialing. "I'm having him transferred to the county psych ward. I've wasted enough time on this."

"Hallelujah," Rhonda said.

The phone rang five times before someone at the other end got around to picking it up. "Neufeld Psychiatric," said a female operator. "How may I direct your call?"

"Hello, this is Dr Leslie Coburn over at Marks Medical Associates."

"Good morning, Doctor," the woman said pleasantly. "How can I help you?"

"I'd like to transfer a patient—" Leslie began.

"Please hold," the operator snapped, her tone suddenly changed to a machine-like drone.

And before Leslie could object, she found her ears being assaulted by an elevator Muzak version of Neil Sedaka's "Laughter in the Rain." She couldn't help but shudder. Tranquil, easygoing, non-threatening, boring music. Almost exactly what you'd expect to hear coming from the speakers mounted in the hallways and sitting rooms of any mental health care facility. Music to soothe the savage beast, as it were, if one's beast had a predilection for lite-FM tunes.

Leslie sighed and lightly pounded the back of her head against the wall in frustration as the operator obviously continued to take her time in returning to their conversation. As Neil Sedaka faded away, a

pre-recorded message started running, in a male voice that sounded a lot like that of the Movie-Phone guy she heard when she called to get tickets for a show: "Thank you for holding. At Neufeld Psychiatric Hospital, your call is important to us. All calls are answered in the order in which they are received." That's a lie, she thought. "Please continue holding. An operator will be with you shortly."

With the message having ended, it took Leslie a few beats to realize the next track playing—one sure to annoy its listeners, as probably *every* tune that was played in this telephonic limbo did—was an orchestral rendition of Coolio's rap "Gangster's Paradise," complete with violin section. "I am in hell," she muttered.

"Okay, this is freaky," she heard Rhonda say. She looked over to find the nurse reading the back cover of *Mission to Zebulon*.

"What's freaky is Harry actually *believes* it," Leslie said.

Rhonda pointed at the book. "But did you *read* this? It's the same symptoms he has, right down to the black marks."

"I read it," Leslie assured her.

"And?" the nurse prompted.

"And it's a load of bull," Leslie snapped. "He wants to tell me he got strep throat from using a public telephone—fine. He wants to worry that he might have contracted influenza from a man coughing on the other side of a room with his head turned the other way—I'm used to that by now. But a book that makes you ill by reading it? Never in a million years."

"Okay," Rhonda said. "But you can't deny the guy has something wrong with him."

Leslie snorted. "You've got that right. That's what I'm trying to take care of right now." She pointed to the phone in her hand. Was that Wayne Newton singing a Las Vegas-style version of Billy Joel's "Just the Way You Are" she was now being subjected to? "Maybe once a psychiatrist has had a chance to examine Harry, he'll be able to reverse this psychosomatic episode he's going through." She shook her head in disgust. "Space plagues, of all things," she muttered.

"Dr Coburn!" Kathy suddenly screamed from Reception. "Dr Coburn, come quick!"

Immediately, Leslie moved to hang up the phone; of course, that was the very moment when the operator came back on the line. "Thank you for holding—" she began.

"I'll have to call you back," Leslie said in a rush and slammed the receiver down. She tore up the hallway toward the waiting area, Rhonda close behind.

When she reached the front of the suite, she came to a halt so abruptly that Rhonda almost collided with her. What she saw standing in front of her was... well, she'd never seen anything like it in her life.

An overweight, dark-haired woman in her fifties was leaning against the reception desk, using it as a means of support to keep her from toppling over. It was only a temporary measure. Her knees were already starting to buckle. Her face and hands were beet-red. She was burning up from whatever fever was ravaging her immune system and blood was steadily gushing from her nose and ears, from beneath her fingernails and from the corners of her eyes; apparently even her tear ducts were affected by the illness. A trail of dark shoeprints led back to the entrance to the building; her feet were bleeding as well, then.

"Harry," the woman croaked in what sounded like a thick Russian accent. "Tell Harry..."

And then she pitched forward and collapsed to the floor. The carpeting around her took on a disturbing crimson hue as the fibers hungrily absorbed the blood that now seemed to be flowing from every pore in her body. She shuddered violently and a dry, sickly gasp pushed itself past her red-stained lips. It was followed by a pink-tinged mucous bubble that took shape around her mouth; it burst with a soft popping sound. Then she stopped moving.

Despite the impulse to stay where she was, Leslie forced herself into action and hurried to the woman's side. "Call 911!" she barked at Kathy, then picked up the woman's left wrist and felt for a pulse. Nothing.

It took a moment for the receptionist to shake off her initial shock—she was pressed against the far wall, apparently to put as much room as possible between herself and the woman—but then she

grabbed the phone and did as ordered. "This is Kathy Gardner," she said in a calm voice, clearly once more in control of herself. "I'm calling from Marks Medical Associates on Ansonia Street; we have a medical emergency. I need an ambulance STAT..."

Good. At least that was under control.

Turning back to the new patient, Leslie began cardiopulmonary resuscitation, pumping the woman's chest with strong compressions of her hands, trying to restart the heart. She ignored the warm sensation she felt around her legs as the blood soaked into her lab coat and stained the fairly costly pair of stockings she'd picked up the other day in a stylish Downtown boutique. Fashion meant little to her right now. All that mattered was saving this woman's life.

Yet there was no response.

Five more pumps of the heart and she moved to the mouth-to-mouth stage: forcing air into the patient's lungs to get them working again. She placed her hands on the woman's lips and nose, pinching the nostrils closed while opening the mouth; then she drew a deep breath and leaned forward, only to draw back in horror, the air exploding from her own lungs in a loud gasp.

There were black lumps on the woman's neck, large, hardened ones that decorated her flesh like grotesque cheetah spots, ending just below the jawline.

Lumps just like the ones on Harry Raditch.

Leslie stared at them, her thoughts a jumble of confusion. Harry's symptoms were all psychosomatic, weren't they? Of course they were, she reminded herself. A self-induced affliction brought on by an overactive imagination and a bad science-fiction novel. Yet here was someone with the exact same symptoms, someone, she would hazard to guess, who had never read about people traveling to the planet Zebulon and contracting a space disease. How could that be?

It was evident the woman knew who Harry was—she'd asked for him by name—and that he would have come to MMA for treatment of his unusual condition, so obviously they'd had some contact with one another. But what could cause her to develop the symptoms of the same imaginary disease? How could it be possible? Maybe she'd had some kind of psychologically sympathetic reaction after he'd told

her about the book. She dismissed the thought almost immediately. A hypochondriac infecting people with just the power of suggestion? It sounded as ludicrous an idea as the plot of the book at the center of all this.

The sound of approaching footsteps made her look up. Some of the patients from the waiting area were creeping forward, trying to get a better view of the latest arrival. Typical human nature, she thought. Give them a car wreck or a sick person to look at and everybody wants to find out how bad the situation is, no matter how disturbing a sight it might turn out to be. In this case, the bloody lab coat was probably the biggest draw for them.

"Everybody stay back!" Leslie cautioned. "She may be contagious."

She only had to say it once, thankfully. The patients immediately reversed direction and headed back toward their seats, glancing over their shoulders as they went in case something even more interesting should happen.

"Does anyone know who this woman is?" Leslie asked them.

"Her name's Elise Mendolsohn," said Rhonda.

Leslie turned to look at her. The nurse was holding the woman's pocketbook in one hand, her wallet in the other. She held out the driver's license for the doctor to see.

"Mendolsohn?" Leslie said. She slowly rose to her feet and peeled off her blood-soaked lab coat. The name sounded familiar. "That's Harry's housekeeper," she realized.

"And now she's dead," Rhonda whispered.

"Just like in the book?" Leslie replied, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Is that what you were going to say?"

Rhonda nodded her head. "But that's impossible, isn't it?"

"Well, of course it is," Leslie shot back. But then she looked down at the woman lying dead at her feet and knew her argument could no longer carry any weight. Harry's housekeeper had indeed contracted the same disease as her employer. The evidence was right in front of her, from the skin blotches to the uncontrollable bleeding and any attempts she might make to put a logical spin on the situation would only end in failure.

For some reason, though, the infection had spread much faster in Mrs Mendolsohn than in Harry. Perhaps it was due to the fact he was the carrier, "Patient Zero," as it were. As medical history had shown, the legendary "Typhoid Mary" of the early twentieth century had managed to go through life without suffering from the very disease she so easily passed along to dozens of victims. Harry Raditch might differ from Mary in that, unlike her, he was suffering, but the basic logic *was* the same: the disease wasn't affecting him as much as those who came into contact with him.

Those who came into contact...

"Okay, then," Rhonda said, startling her from her reverie. "Tell me something, Dr Coburn: if it's so impossible, how can somebody go around spreading a fictional disease?"

Leslie shook her head and stared at the nurse, unable to keep the fear from creeping into her voice. "That's not the most important question, Rhonda," she said quietly. "The question is, how do you cure a fictional disease?"

EIGHT

Once Leslie informed Dr Yordan about the spread of the infection and the dead woman now lying in Exam Two, it didn't take long for the CCD to mobilize its local forces and quarantine the entire building, as well as all members of the MMA staff who'd been anywhere near the victim. Marks and Gruber hadn't yet arrived at the offices when all hell broke loose and now that a veritable army of police officers, state health officials and even a quick-response team from the Department of Homeland Security (probably there to learn if Harry's disease was caused by a biological weapon released by terrorists on American soil, Leslie figured) stood between them and the entrance, they weren't going to be let in anytime soon. Not until the "all clear" had been given by the CCD. Maybe not even then.

Kathy, two nurses and a few patients sat in the waiting room, watching men and women in bright orange Hazardous Materials suits going about their work: doing sweeps of the furniture, fixtures, and walls for any traces of viruses; cutting out a large swatch of the carpeting around reception to collect every drop of the blood that had soaked into the fibers; consulting with one another in hushed tones so she couldn't overhear their conversations. On the one hand, it was kind of exciting for Kathy, like something you'd see on a TV show, with a doctor or a police detective racing through a major city, a clock ticking down the minutes and seconds in one corner of the screen, letting you know how much time remained before the Terrible Thing that was supposed to happen came to pass. On the other hand, it scared the living hell out of her, knowing that the truly Terrible Thing might be that she was infected with whatever the Mendolsohn woman had contracted. In that case, the ticking clock didn't seem quite so exciting, not when it would only be winding down for one purpose: to mark the exact moment when Kathy Gardner started bleeding to death.

One Haz-Mat tech detached himself from the group on the other side of the room and headed toward the corridor leading to the doctors' offices and exam rooms. Kathy stood up and moved to

intercept him. As she drew close, she noticed the name "MORGENSTERN" stenciled in black letters across the ID patch on the front of his suit. And although that meant she recognized him as the man in charge of this operation, it didn't mean she appreciated being locked up like a prisoner in the very place where she worked, or that she didn't expect to get some answers to her questions.

She stepped into his path and the CCD physician came to a dead halt inches away. "Something I can do for you, Miss Gardner?" he asked sharply.

"Dr Morgenstern, how long do we have to stay here?" she asked, pointing back toward her compatriots in quarantine.

He stared at her through the plastic shield of his hood, pale green eyes practically aflame under the shadow of his thick brows. "Until we know if you're contagious," he said in a muffled voice, as though he were addressing an idiot. He eyed her suspiciously. "Have you been tested yet?"

"For what?" she shot back. "According to Dr Coburn, nobody knows what this thing is. So just what are you supposed to be testing us for?"

His thin lips drew back in what she imagined was supposed to be a smile, but it instead made her think of a pit bull baring its teeth before attacking. "Apparently something 'not of this earth' as it's been described to me by Mr Raditch. You haven't seen any little green men sitting around the waiting room lately, have you?"

Kathy noticed just how confused she looked by his comments when she caught sight of her reflection in the plastic face-shield. Considering a woman had died from whatever Harry Raditch was passing along, she didn't find the situation all that funny. And she came right out and said so.

Morgenstern shrugged. "Then you fail to see how absurd the situation truly is, Miss Gardner. A woman stumbles into your waiting room, dying from a disease no one has ever encountered before and the person she apparently contracted it from claims he caught it from reading a book." He paused, apparently for effect. "Is any of that sinking in yet? Trust me, you'll be in stitches when it finally does. I know the lab boys back at the CCD certainly are."

Kathy frowned. "I don't care much for your attitude, Doctor."

"And *I* don't care much for medical mysteries, Miss Gardner," he countered. "They make me irritable, and I don't *like* being irritable. It's bad for my GI tract." His dour expression darkened even further. "And knowing that a hypochondriac of all people is at the center of it..." Another pause, during which he seemed to be fighting to get his growing anger back under control. He exhaled sharply, his breath momentarily clouding the face-shield. "Well," he finally said, "let's just say I don't want to be here any more than you do."

Kathy was on the verge of arguing that comment—at least he could take off the Haz-Mat suit and exit the building whenever he wanted to—but then decided against it. What would be the point, really?

"Then I suppose I should let you get back to whatever it is you're supposed to be doing," she said testily. "So sorry to have taken up your time."

He didn't rise to the bait. Instead, the pit bull grin once more contorted his features. "Don't wait too long to get tested, Miss Gardner," he cautioned. "You wouldn't want to turn out like that housekeeper, would you?"

No doubt it was meant to be a friendly reminder, but the way it sounded made it seem more like a threat or a verbal slap to the face. Too shocked by the brusque tone of the question to reply, Kathy could only stand there, eyes wide, mouth gaping, as Morgenstern stepped around her and continued down the corridor.

It took a few seconds to regain her composure, but by then the time for a snappy comeback had passed. Angry and a little shaken, she shuffled over to the waiting area and flopped into one of the chairs.

In retrospect, she should have known better than to expect any sort of answers from that man. He hadn't been very helpful since he and his staff had arrived on the scene, spending most of the first hour barking orders at everyone and telling the MMA staff to stay out of the way. You'd think a health care specialist would treat his patients with more compassion, but apparently Dr Morgenstern handled people the same way he would furniture: as something to shove to the side until there was a need for it.

But maybe, she had to admit, that was just his way of handling a crisis situation: take charge, get the lay of the land and then take whatever steps were necessary to find a solution to the problem. After all, Morgenstern and his team were trying to make sense of an emergency that defied logic. Even when Dr Coburn had attempted to explain it to her, Kathy had had trouble grasping just what was going on. Harry Raditch coming down with an actual sickness? Well, even a broken clock was right twice a day. But coming down with something that didn't truly exist? It sounded like one of those science fiction shows her teenaged son, Jason, was always watching on television.

But it wasn't. And that poor woman, Mrs Mendolsohn, had proved that as impossible as a person contracting an imaginary disease might be, it didn't mean it was any less dangerous. Or any less contagious.

Did that mean she might have it, too, Kathy wondered? She'd been sitting at the reception desk when Mrs Mendolsohn stumbled in, and hadn't reacted quickly enough to avoid the housekeeper's outstretched hand as she reached out for help. Kathy hadn't even known the woman's blood had gotten on her until Rhonda pointed to the splotch on the side of her neck.

Thankfully, she'd managed to stay calm long enough to reach the ladies' room before the horror of what she'd just witnessed, coupled with the fear that whatever Mrs Mendolsohn had was now seeping into her pores, finally caused her knees to buckle. With some effort and a bit of luck, she made it to the toilet just ahead of her egg-and-bacon breakfast biscuit as it forced its way out of her roiling stomach. After that, it had taken awhile for her to regain her composure and her strength, but sitting on the floor like a rag doll when there was work to be done was not something Kathy Gardner could see herself doing, so she'd picked herself up, cleaned herself off, and went to see if she could be of any help to the patients stuck in the waiting area.

But now she was one of those people in need of help. Kathy shook her head despondently. Killer diseases from outer space, picked up from reading a science fiction book. And Harry Raditch somehow the cause of it? A man who seemed to spend every waking moment of his

life dreaming up new sicknesses to be treated, just to get a little attention from his physicians? If she hadn't witnessed his handiwork with her own eyes, she might have laughed the very notion of it.

So maybe she did see the absurdity of the situation after all. Maybe now she understood Morgenstern's attitude.

"That doesn't make it right, though," she muttered.

Kathy sighed, her gaze falling on the closed door to Dr Coburn's office. Not for the first time, she wished she could handle this crisis as well as Leslie seemed to be taking it.

Leslie wasn't all that surprised when she found the small black lumps clustered on her chest, but touching them, feeling the rough texture just below the skin, knowing they were real, had proven too much for her. After closing and locking the door to her office, it had taken her almost a half-hour to stop crying, but even then the tears continued to fall each time she thought about what was happening to her. It was so damned unfair. She was young, pretty, incredibly talented and respected in her profession, she'd just been reunited with a man she wanted back in her life. Why now? Why the hell did this crap have to come crashing down on her now to ruin it all?

She'd surmised the intense itching she'd been experiencing since Harry had barged into the offices was an early symptom of the disease; she'd just forced herself to remain calm, to focus on treating her patient and not let herself get caught up in the hysteria. But now, with the CCD in charge, Harry's care was their responsibility, leaving her with plenty of time to dwell on the lumps forming under her skin. And on the realization that she would soon die if a cure couldn't be found.

Her phone rang, startling her. Nervously, she picked up the receiver and placed it against her ear, certain there would be more bad news on the other end of the line. "H-hello?" she said.

"Leslie? It's Collin."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Dr Marks."

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

She laughed mirthlessly. "About as well as can be expected, under the circumstances."

Marks grunted. "Does the CCD have *any* idea what we're dealing with here?"

"I've spoken with Dr Morgenstern—he's running the show—and no, they don't. So far, they've only been able to determine it's not airborne," she explained. "It's a contact virus. But they can't classify it any further. The further. The origin's unknown."

"Has anyone else manifested symptoms?" Marks asked. "Other than the housekeeper, I mean?"

"No, just me so far," Leslie replied. "Thankfully."

Marks sighed. "I wish I could be more helpful than just cheerleading from the sidelines." There was a pause on the line. "Leslie... I want to apologize for not believing you earlier."

A small smile dimpled Leslie's cheeks. "It's okay, Dr Marks. I'm not sure I actually believe any of this myself."

"You'll keep me informed of any developments?" he asked.

"Of course," she assured him. She looked up to find Rhonda standing in the hall, not even remembering when she'd gotten up to unlock and open the door. "I've got to go, Dr Marks. I'll speak with you soon." She hung up the phone and leaned back in her seat. "What can I do for you, Rhonda?"

"You didn't tell him about the book," the nurse said.

Leslie shook her head. "How could I? He'd think I was losing it."

"You told Morgenstern about it."

"That was different," Leslie replied. "He's in here with us, not outside the building like Dr Marks, and withholding information from the CCD—no matter how crazy it makes me sound—wouldn't have been the smartest thing to do. I had to be completely honest with him about Harry and the alleged source of infection."

"And what was his reaction?" Rhonda asked.

Leslie paused. "He thought I was losing it." She shrugged. "Can you blame him?"

"Not really," Rhonda commented. "But maybe at this point even Dr Marks would be willing to listen to anything. I mean, his entire business has been placed under quarantine, and there's a platoon of

cops in riot gear camped out in front of the building. It doesn't get any crazier than that."

Leslie nodded. "You could be right. If it happens to come up the next time I talk to him, maybe I'll tell him."

"And maybe you won't, right?" Rhonda shrugged. "Hey, it's your decision."

Leslie sighed; she was depressed enough without having to get drawn into arguments with her nurse. Instead, she let her gaze drift past Rhonda and into the hallway, where she spotted one of the Haz-Mat-suited medical specialists walking by, heading in the direction of Exam Three. She rose from her chair. "I'd better go see what's happening with Harry," she told Rhonda.

The nurse practically jumped back into the corridor to give Leslie the room she needed to get by. She wasn't angered by Rhonda's reaction. Given the contagious nature of the virus (whether it was space-borne or homegrown on Earth didn't really matter at this point) avoiding any sort of contact with those infected with it seemed like the best strategy for staying healthy.

Leslie strolled down to what she'd started to think of as "Harry's room," taking great care not to glance into Exam Two, where Mrs Mendolsohn's body was stored. Although the CCD had sealed the poor woman's corpse in what was generally referred to as a "body bag," her shape was still discernible under the dark plastic. Leslie instead focused her attention on the orange uniform and hood of the person ahead of her.

Exam Three looked like scientists from NASA had set up shop in the cramped space, filling it with hi-tech monitoring devices that beeped and buzzed and whirred, every one of them connected to Emerson's very own Patient Zero. The CCD tech was standing next to one of the monitors, checking the results that were displayed on the small screen.

Harry, meanwhile, lay on the examination table inside an oxygen tent, head propped up on a pillow so he could read the book he was holding. For a moment, Leslie felt like running over and yanking it out of his hands—hadn't he caused enough trouble with his reading—but then realized how irrational that would be. She wasn't paying off

all those student loans every month just so she could throw away her medical career by abusing patients.

Stay cool, she thought. No need to go recklessly flying off the handle. You're a health care professional, Dr Coburn, so act like one.

Chin up, she entered the room. The tech turned around to see who was coming in, and she realized it was Dr Morgenstern.

"How's our patient?" she asked him.

He didn't seem to know what to say immediately, so rather than answer, he held out a clipboard containing the latest test results on Harry. "See for yourself."

She looked over the chart and pursed her lips. "That's strange. His condition hasn't advanced since last night. In fact, I'd say his vitals are stabilizing."

"I noticed that, too," Morgenstern replied. "We're thinking if we can figure out why that might be happening, maybe we can crack this thing."

Good luck finding that out, Leslie thought ruefully. "Can I talk to him?" she asked.

Morgenstern considered the request for a second or two, then nodded. "Make it quick. We need to start monitoring you, too, Doctor."

"Wonderful," she muttered sarcastically.

Morgenstern sidled around her and stepped back into the corridor. Like Rhonda, he was giving her a wide berth. There was something almost comical about the great care he took in avoiding contact with her, even though he was sealed inside an environmental suit. It brought a small smile to her face.

"I'll be next door if you need me," he said.

"Thank you, Doctor." She watched him head toward Exam Two, then turned back to her patient.

"They told me about Mrs Mendolsohn." Harry closed the book and lay it flat on his lap; it was a Bible, of all things. Hopefully, he hadn't been reading the Book of Revelations. "History is such a cruel author. I'm sure it will blame this entire mess on me."

Leslie frowned. Now there was the Harry Raditch she knew and had come to find extremely annoying long before this crisis arose.

Always too wrapped up in his own concerns to acknowledge the world around him.

"I need some answers, Harry, and I don't have much time." She rolled up the left sleeve of her lab coat to display the cobblestoned pattern adorning her arm.

His eyes widened in horror. "Oh, no... Not you, too."

"Never mind that now," she insisted, and rolled the sleeve back down. "Why didn't you tell me about the book from the beginning?"

"I tried to, but... I couldn't bear you thinking..." He waved his hands helplessly, as though searching for the words to say. "I didn't want to come across like I was just some crazy hypochondriac."

Leslie couldn't help but smile; "irony" didn't even come close to describing this absurd situation.

"You're the last person I would ever want to hurt," Harry continued. "Do you know you're the only doctor who's ever treated me with respect?"

She didn't, but considering Dr Marks's remarks about his former patient, it wasn't a surprise. "Thank you, Harry. I appreciate that."

Harry grunted. "And look what it got you."

Leslie shrugged. "Well, feeling sorry for ourselves isn't going to solve anything." She stepped closer to the bed. "Tell me everything, Harry. From the start, exactly how it all happened."

"I... I don't know how to explain it."

"Try," she said.

He nodded, and looked as though he was attempting to recall the events that led up to the moment he'd stormed into the office. "I found the book listed on the website of a science-fiction collector," he began slowly. "He was trying to sell off some of his less expensive possessions to make ends meet, and when I spotted a first edition paperback of *Mission to Zebulon* among the sale items, I had to have it." He gazed at Leslie. "You see, the author, AR Douglas, is considered one of the forgotten masters of SF literature, a writer on the level of Ray Bradbury, AE Van Vogt and EE "Doc" Smith. Unfortunately, he committed suicide in 1964, shortly after the death of his wife, Rosalind, so most people have never heard of him.

Mission to Zebulon is his best-known work of the six novels and three dozen or so short stories he wrote before his passing."

Leslie eased herself onto the chair next to the bed. She didn't have a clue as to who the writers he'd mentioned were, but she wasn't about to ask him to provide footnotes for every comment he made. Just let him get to the point, she told herself. "All right, so you ordered the book."

"It arrived in the mail three days ago," Harry continued. Some color returned to his cheeks as he blushed. "I must admit, I acted somewhat like a child on Christmas morning when I received it. I'd read some of Douglas's other works over the years, but finally getting to place my hands on a copy of *Mission to Zebulon* was like discovering him all over again. I could barely wait for the end of business hours so I could fully immerse myself in his fabulous writing."

"And when you did?" Leslie prompted.

Harry sighed. "The man was a poet, doctor, an absolute poet. The story was so haunting, so vivid... The worlds he created were so vibrant; fraught with dangers, but also possessing great beauty..." He shook his head sadly. "Such a tragic waste, to die with so much talent left untapped."

He was getting off-track. "Harry?" Leslie asked, a little sharply.

He gazed at her for a moment, then smiled weakly. "I'm sorry, doctor. I didn't mean for my thoughts to wander away like that."

She nodded. "That's all right."

He took a deep breath, slowly released it. "I finished the book two nights ago. It left me feeling drained, like I'd experienced firsthand every adventure, every tragedy that Captain Mann and his crew went through. I... I couldn't get it out of my head, even when I was falling asleep." Harry closed his eyes; his lips trembled. "I wish I'd never woken up this morning."

Leslie reached over and gently patted him on the hand. "You don't mean that, Harry. We'll find some way to beat this thing, trust me."

He opened his eyes, and a tear rolled down his left cheek. "Thank you... Leslie," he said haltingly.

"You're welcome, Harry," she replied. "But you're not telling me everything, are you?"

He tilted his head to one side, clearly confused by the question. "What do you mean?"

"The book is only part of the problem," she explained, "not the direct cause of it. I examined it, remember? There was nothing about the book that suggested the presence of potentially hazardous pathogens: no mold, no mildew, not even a thin layer of dust between the pages."

"All right," he said. "So what are you getting at, doctor?"

Back to the damned guessing games, she thought angrily. "Harry, I need to know: did anything like this ever happen to you before?"

He stared at her blankly. "Anything like what? You mean like this disease?"

She ground her teeth, fighting the urge to reach through the plastic curtain and shake the answers out of him. "No, I mean like..." She paused. How could she put this? "Have you ever known of other events where something that shouldn't be possible took place? Something that specifically involved you being in the same area?"

She heard him say, "Like what?" but the look in his eyes confirmed her suspicions. Getting all worked up over the plot of a science-fiction story like he had, making himself sick with a fictional disease, it couldn't be an isolated incident. There had to be something in Harry's past that echoed what he was going through, what they were all going through. An event of some sort, perhaps during his childhood, that set the precedent for this recent bizarre trip into the unknown in which the nerdy bookseller was acting as reluctant tour guide. Something that could possibly explain just how a shuttered hypochondriac could take an imaginary disease and make it all too real.

And then it hit her. Hadn't Harry commented just the other day that his imagination sometimes got out of control?

She turned at the sound of approaching footsteps. Morgenstern walked into the room and gestured toward the hallway. "Sorry, doctor, but I need to run some tests on *you* now."

Leslie nodded. She turned back to Harry and gently patted his leg. "Try not to read any other fiction books while I'm gone, all right?" she asked and winked. "I don't really need any further complications right now."

Harry laughed softly. "I'll do my best."

She rose and headed toward the door, to follow Morgenstern into the hall, but she paused at the threshold. "Harry, how does the book end?"

He looked at her curiously. "What do you mean?"

"This virus that infects the crew of the spaceship, do they find a cure for it?"

She saw the color drain from Harry's face and felt her stomach nervously roll over. The answer formed in her mind before he even said it.

"No, doctor," he said hoarsely. "They all die."

NINE

The fever consumed him, roasting him from within, igniting every nerve ending, boiling his blood until he began thinking death was preferable to the agony he endured. And for someone like Arlen Mann, someone used to being in control of any situation, the knowledge that he could not even control his bodily functions was almost too much to bear.

He stared at the .45 in his hand, felt the weight of the pearl handle, cool against his burning flesh. The gun had belonged to his grandfather, Marcus Mann, one of the earliest trans-galactic explorers in the days when a hyper-travel drive system was more likely to incinerate both ship and crew upon activation than open a tunnel to infinity. The notion of officers and crewmen brandishing firearms had been frowned upon by the United Space Council, especially on first-contact missions, but Marcus had always been a firm believer that you got further in negotiating with alien races by carrying a gun and a smile into a meeting than you did by showing them a smile alone. On more than one occasion, he'd been proven right, especially when it came to his run-ins with the nefarious race known as the W'renn.

But would he have ever contemplated using this very gun to end his own life, as his grandson was doing now? Not likely. But did that make Arlen Mann any less heroic, any less a human being? Of course not and the pain he felt was not just physical. Watching each member of his crew slowly, agonizingly slip away tore at his soul, weighed heavily on his heart and mind. Only he and Diana were left now... and soon enough even they would be gone. Who would mourn for them?

The ship's muted lighting played along the barrel of the .45, gently shaking him from his reverie. It would be so easy, he thought; so easy to just place the weapon against his temple, close his eyes, and pull the trigger. He had rehearsed it enough times in his mind that actually carrying out that final, fatal action would become automatic. At least this way he'd be able to take control of his life one last time,

instead of waiting for the Grim Reaper's scythe to come slashing down and end his misery. Besides, with his crew dead and he soon to follow, what was left for him to live for?

His fingers closed around the butt of the gun, and the weapon began its slow ascent toward its target. But then—

"No," he said firmly. "Not that way. Never that way."

He lowered the gun and placed it on the table beside his chair. Suicide was not the answer.

"Arlen?"

He froze and looked toward the Med Lab bed. Diana was watching him, fear shining brightly in her reddened eyes. How long had she been silently observing his silent battle with his conscience? Long enough, apparently, for her to realize what he had been about to do.

"Were you just going to give up?" she asked. The hurt and anger in her voice stabbed at his heart as surely as any knife. "That's not the Arlen Mann I knew... or fell in love with."

The captain levered himself to a standing position, using the table to support him. It took a great deal of effort to regain his footing; every movement produced another shock of intense pain. A shuffling gait brought him to his wife's side and he eased himself onto the edge of the mattress. He took her hand in both of his and gently rubbed the gnarled fingers.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said. "It's just... the pain makes it so hard..."

She nodded weakly. "I know, honey," she said. "I know. But you can't give up now. There must be something we can still do in the time we have left."

He shook his head as crimson drops trickled from his nostrils to darken the virgin white sheets. "Neither one of us is in any position to start thinking of last-minute cures." He paused. "It's down to just you and me, Mrs Mann," he said, with a trace of his old humor. "Alone at last."

Not even the hideous black lumps covering her face could hide that radiant smile. "I have to admit... this isn't how I pictured our honeymoon."

"Someplace a little more romantic. Say, the firefalls of Kraal 9?" He chuckled, his chest rattling with the blood and mucous that was

starting to fill his lungs. It wouldn't be long now...

"That would have been nice," Diana replied. She closed her eyes for a moment, seeming to draw upon what little strength remained in her frail body to say what came next. "Arlen... when I said we had to do something, I wasn't talking about cures. We're well past that stage. What I had in mind was more along the lines of preventing this disease from claiming the life of any other unwary spacefarer."

He gazed at her, wondering just what clever idea could be percolating in that pretty little head of hers. And then it came to him as well. "The graviton bombs."

"Buy the Mann a cigar," Diana said with a smile. "Took you long enough to figure it out, husband of mine."

"That's why I married you, you little minx," he quipped. "I knew there was more to Diana Calloway than just good looks and a navigator's exceptional sense of direction." He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "You know, I've always been attracted to the brainy. types."

"Neanderthals usually are," she replied with a grin. "That way they only have to focus on the hunting, while the womenfolk run things and come up with the big ideas." The grin slowly faded, to be replaced by a haunted expression that made her look like the spectre of death itself. "Arlen... I..."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, baby. I'm scared, too. But you're right. We can't let this happen to anyone else." He forced himself to his feet. "I'd better get started. It'll take some time to activate the bombs and every second counts."

"Then you'll need help," Diana said, and she eased back the sheet.

"Honey, no," Mann urged. "You're too weak—"

"We're married now, Arlen," she replied sternly. "And that means we do everything together, as a couple." She winked playfully. "Now, are you going to help me out of this bed, or do I need to drag myself all the way down to the weapons bay to prove to you I can still carry out my duties, Captain?"

Mann sighed dramatically. "Very well, Ensign Calloway. I wouldn't want you to report me to Space Command for refusing the aid of one of my crewmen in an emergency."

"I guess not," she replied. "My father would have you stripped of your rank."

Mann grunted. "Just be thankful we never told him about the wedding. He would have had me strapped to a passing comet headed for the far side of the universe."

"Maybe," Diana said. "But I think he would have been proud to have you as a son-in-law."

Man smiled wistfully. "Guess we'll never know, huh?"

"No. I guess we won't," she had to admit.

He got her to her feet with surprising ease, as though the merest contact with her gave his atrophying limbs a boost of vitality. She leaned on him for support and he gladly gave it.

Maybe old man Calloway might have been proud to call Arlen Mann his son-in-law. But he could never have been prouder than Arlen was right now as, arm-in-arm, he and Mrs Mann took their first steps toward their final voyage.

Together.

"And then what happens?" Rhonda asked.

Leslie closed the book. "Mann detonates the bombs on the ship. The blast is so powerful it tears the planet apart."

"The End."

Leslie nodded. "The End."

Rhonda snorted derisively. "So instead of killing himself, they both wind up committing suicide."

Leslie shook her head. "No, they sacrifice themselves. By blowing up Zebulon, they prevent other potential explorers from contracting the disease. Instead of the infection killing them, Mann and Diana get to die as heroes." She shrugged. "It's kinda sweet, in its own way. A little too purple in the prose for my tastes, but I can see why it would appeal to someone like Harry."

"But they never found a cure for the damn thing," the nurse observed. "Did they?"

Leslie frowned and placed the book back on her desk. "No," she admitted. "No, they didn't."

Rhonda exhaled sharply. "Christ. Talk about your depressing endings."

TEN

"Damn it!" Leslie roared. Furious, she swept her hands across the surface of her desk, knocking every book on it to the floor.

Every possible lead had become a dead end. Every test had turned out inconclusive. She'd consulted with doctors at the CCD, the CDC, and a dozen other medical organizations, but none of them knew of a virus with similar effects. Books on infectious diseases, web-posted articles on the latest contagions, nothing proved helpful.

The lumps continued their advance across her body, up her arms and legs, around her neck. Her left eye had gone blood red, as Harry's had in the second stage of the illness. The bleeding would begin soon enough, but when? How long had Mrs Mendolsohn been infected before the symptoms became terminal? A day? Two at the most? How much time did that leave for her?

"Dr Coburn?" came a timid voice from the hallway.

She looked up to find Rhonda standing in the door. The nurse rolled up both sleeves on her uniform. Black, stone-like lesions dotted her forearms. "It got me, too."

Rhonda began sobbing and Leslie stood up and crossed the room to embrace her. She gently patted the nurse on the back, cooing in her ear to calm her nerves. "It'll be all right," she whispered softly. "Everything will turn out just fine."

If only there was someone to calm my nerves, Leslie thought. An image of Terry flashed through her mind and she bit her bottom lip to keep from crying herself. So unfair; it was all so unfair.

"I don't want to die like that housekeeper." Rhonda moaned, her voice thick with phlegm.

Leslie stepped back and placed her hands on the nurse's shoulders. She tried to flash her best reassuring smile; it took some effort. "Rhonda, listen to me. I will do everything I can to beat this, but I'm going to need your help."

The nurse stared at her for a moment and then nodded, although the light of fear never dimmed in her eyes. Leslie led her over to one

of the guest chairs then went back behind her desk to take her own seat.

"So, they really didn't beat it in the book?" Rhonda asked, once she'd composed herself.

Leslie grimaced. "That's right," she replied. "I even read it a second time, just to be sure."

Rhonda laughed sharply, bitterly. "So we're going to die because some lousy writer couldn't come up with a happy ending?"

Leslie's eyebrows shot up. "Wait a minute," she said. "That might be it."

"What might be it?" Rhonda asked testily. "What did I say now?"

"Harry convinced himself he had the virus in this book," she stated.

"Right..."

"Just like, as a hypochondriac, he's convinced himself he's had other diseases in the past," Leslie continued. "Only this time, he made it real."

Rhonda shrugged. "If you say so."

"Don't you see? Harry's imagination brought the virus to life!"

It all made sense now, in a weird sort of way. Harry had mentioned losing control of his imagination. The disease was a fictional invention, a plot device that caused him to focus his thoughts on the symptoms described in the book to the point where it seemed utterly possible, to him at least, that they could exist in the real world. And then he took that extra mental step and made it happen.

"His imagination," Rhonda repeated. She snorted. "That's an even crazier idea than the space disease."

Leslie waved a hand at her in a dismissive manner. No sarcastic nurse was going to discourage her from pursuing the only option they might have left. "So if we approach the problem from that angle, then maybe all we have to do is use his imagination to create a cure."

Rhonda stared blankly at her. "Now you lost me."

"It's called the Placebo Effect," Leslie explained. "An imaginary sickness calls for an imaginary cure."

"There's nothing imaginary about this," Rhonda interjected. "We're dying, Leslie. We need a real cure, not some daydream to

keep the fruitcake happy in his and our final moments."

"Yes, I know," Leslie said curtly. She went back to work on her computer, accessed the Internet, and went to the Google search engine. She remembered seeing an article in a newspaper one of the patients in the waiting room had been reading a few days ago. Something about a sky show.

"Got it!" she mumbled, ignoring Rhonda's confused expression. She typed in "RECENT METEOR SHOWERS" and hit the RETURN key. The first link to appear in answer to her query was to a front-page article on the *Chicago Sun-Times*, dated three days past: "METEOR SHOWER TONIGHT KICKS OFF SKYWATCHING SEASON." "That's the one," she said triumphantly. It, in turn, led to a follow-up article from the next day's edition: "ASTRONOMERS SAY LAST NIGHT'S METEOR SHOWER LARGEST IN DECADES." Leslie grinned. "I am definitely on a roll."

"Mind telling the rest of us what it is you're so excited about?" Rhonda asked.

Leslie nodded, her eyes never leaving the screen as she scanned the article. "Okay, what do we know about meteors?"

Rhonda looked at her like she had two heads. "What?"

"Like Harry's space plague, they're 'not of this earth'," she explained, turning back to the nurse.

"Neither is my boyfriend," Rhonda quipped. "I gotta tell you, Leslie, you're not making any sense here. None."

"It makes perfect sense, if you'd only take a moment to fit the pieces together," Leslie countered as she picked up the phone. She hit the speed-dial button for Marks's cell phone number. "We're going to write a new ending for this story. A happy ending." The call went through immediately. "Dr Marks? It's Leslie. Where are you?"

"Out front," he replied. "How are you doing in there? Any new developments?"

"Rhonda's manifesting, too. She's in the early stages of the infection."

There was a long pause. "Oh," Marks finally said.

"But I think I know how to beat this virus," Leslie continued.

Another pause. He probably didn't believe that for one second and how could she blame him? She had trouble convincing *herself* that she might be onto something.

"Dr Marks?" she prompted.

"I'm still here," he replied. "What can I do to help?"

ELEVEN

It sounded like a simple request to make, but Leslie soon realized she should have known from the start that there would be a certain amount of bureaucracy involved in carrying out her plan. The larger the organization, the bigger the complications, or so went the formula as it was explained to her by Marks. The plan would have to be outlined in full, omitting not one minor detail, before it could be submitted to CCD director Aldous Prescott for approval.

It sounded like an insane way to do things. Unfortunately, checking with Morgenstern to see if that were really true only confirmed Marks's take on the matter.

"But we're running out of time, Dr Morgenstern!" Leslie insisted. "Harry's vitals might have stabilized in the past few hours, but the rest of us are still very much infected." She gestured in the direction of Exam Two and Mrs Mendolsohn's body. "We've already seen that the disease ultimately results in death, with the victim bleeding out because the virus has shut down their clotting factor. Do you really think Rhonda and I are willing to just sit around and wait while somebody three states over schedules meeting after meeting to discuss my idea with a panel of experts?"

She pounded her fist on the desk, thankful she'd had the presence of mind to close the office door before launching into her tirade. Shouting at the CCD field manager out in the hall would have only made everyone else as upset as she was. The result would have been either everyone sobbing on each other's shoulders over their plight or ganging up on Morgenstern to try to force him into doing what needed to be done.

Leslie looked across the room at the odd spectacle of a man dressed in what could have passed for a spacesuit in *Mission to Zebulon*, calmly sitting in a chair with his legs crossed as though they were discussing the weather instead of lethal imaginary diseases. The absurdity of it brought a smile to her lips.

"Look, Dr Morgenstern," she said in a softer tone, "it's not like I'm asking you to loan me something hazardous. You probably have

everything I need in that big mobile headquarters I saw parked out front."

The physician stared at his gloved hands for a moment. "I understand your situation, Dr Coburn," he replied slowly as he looked her in the eye, "and I'm sorry this isn't turning out the way you'd expected. But the director really isn't too comfortable with what you have in mind. He doesn't want the agency coming out of this looking foolish."

"Oh, it's just a little playacting," Leslie said dismissively. "Where's the harm in it for your boss if it winds up doing some good?"

Morgenstern frowned. "I'm not sure you're aware of this, Dr Coburn, but after the events of September eleventh, there's been a great deal of concern expressed by US citizens about the possibility that terrorists might try to use a biological weapon in the next attack. That's why our friends from Homeland Security are parked right next to that mobile headquarters you spotted."

"I figured as much," she commented.

"Given those factors and the heightened state of alert we live under," he continued, "I'm sure you can see why the Center for Contagious Diseases would be unwilling to 'playact' for the benefit of your patient. The man presents a danger not only to the community, but quite possibly the entire country."

Leslie smiled. "I think you're exaggerating, Doctor—"

"Am I? His housekeeper stumbled in here sometime after Raditch passed the virus on to her. Do you know when that contact occurred, exactly?"

She paused. "Harry said it had been in the last couple of days. The afternoon before he came here."

"And in all the hours between the transmission of the disease and the woman's appearance in your offices, exactly how many people had she, in turn, been in contact with? Not counting the ones in your waiting room."

Leslie started. "I... I don't know," she replied quietly. "With everything that's happened, I didn't really give it any thought."

"Fortunately, we did," Morgenstern said. "Once we'd compiled enough basic information on Elise Mendolsohn—medical history,

family members, home address—we dispatched teams to retrace her steps and interview anyone she had been in contact with. Then we convinced them to come in for blood testing on the pretense that the victim had contracted the super flu bug that's going around and might have passed it on."

Leslie raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "But how could you test for something that's unclassifiable?"

"We used the clotting factor test results you'd compiled on Raditch as a starting point, monitoring elevated platelet counts and the like. Taking that approach at least gave us a leg-up on isolating any potential carriers."

"So, what did you find out?" she asked.

Morgenstern drew a deep breath, then exhaled sharply. "Mrs Mendolsohn appears to have been quite active in her community and a very popular individual." He paused. "Up to this point, we believe we've identified close to one hundred people who may be infected."

Leslie shook her head; it was almost impossible to believe. "But how could she make contact with that many people in so little time?"

"She didn't," Morgenstern replied. "You've seen it for yourself, Doctor. The disease instantly moves from victim to victim once physical contact has been made. Mrs Mendolsohn gave it to her son and a half-dozen others in her area; they, in turn, passed it on to the people with whom they interacted and so on, and so on."

Leslie swallowed hard. "Are you saying we have an epidemic on our hands?"

"What I'm saying, Dr Coburn, is that the situation has become so drastic that we have no way to contain the spread of the virus and no known way to reverse its effects."

"Then what is the harm in trying out my plan?" she said, aware of how desperate she sounded. "You make one phone call to your boss, explain my findings—or have me get on to explain my findings to him—and we make it very clear we don't really have any other options available to us."

He glared at her through the Haz-Mat suit's plastic face-shield. "Do you seriously expect me to tell Dr Prescott that what we're facing is a virus generated solely by the imagination of one of your patients?"

That the reason it can't be classified, or even show up in test results, is because it doesn't really exist? Do you have any idea how insane that sounds, Dr Coburn?"

Leslie stared back at him, drumming the fingers of her right hand on her desk while she rested her chin in her left. It was damned frustrating. The man was so focused on covering his and Prescott's asses that he refused to contemplate anything beyond protecting the reputation of the agency. Well, it shouldn't have come as a complete surprise to find this out, she told herself. After all, Dr Marks *had* warned her there would be more politics than medicine involved at this stage of the game. So maybe it was time to try another approach...

"Tell me something, Dr Morgenstern," she finally said. "Which would be more of a public relations nightmare for the CCD: having people find out you put on a show in order to fool the patient responsible for this whole mess... or your director having to admit at a press conference that you don't know what you're dealing with and have no way to cure it?"

Morgenstern opened his mouth, his stern expression clearly showing he meant to dismiss her question, and then he stopped and slowly closed his mouth. He sat quietly, arms folded across his chest, staring into space; Leslie could almost hear the wheels turning in his brain as he considered which of her choices carried the greater political weight. He ended the internal debate with a sharp nod of his head, apparently having reached his decision.

"Well, we already have the costumes," he said with a tone of resignation, pointing to his Haz-Mat suit. "What time does the curtain go up?"

About ninety minutes later, Leslie strode into Exam Three, all smiles and high energy. She found Harry reading, as usual. Somebody—probably one of the CCD techs working under Morgenstern because Rhonda now refused to go anywhere near him—had slipped him a copy of last week's *US News and World Report*.

That in itself was a cause for celebration. Anything that kept his mind rooted in the real world and away from science fiction Fantasyland was a step in the right direction. However, the tale she was about to spin wasn't all that far removed from something you might find in the pages of *Mission to Zebulon*.

"You certainly look chipper, Dr Coburn," Harry observed. "Has there been a breakthrough?"

"In a manner of speaking," she admitted. Here we go, she thought. "Harry, did you hear about the meteor showers two nights ago?"

"Yes. In fact, I'd been looking forward to their arrival," he replied, then gestured at his deteriorating body. "Unfortunately, certain... circumstances arose that prevented me from watching them from the roof of my house." He gazed at her suspiciously. "What of it?"

She smiled, eyes wide with wonder. at least, that's how she hoped it looked to him. "Well, something incredible happened. One of the meteors actually hit the Earth during the shower."

Harry snorted derisively. "Impossible. We would have felt it."

"It hit in North Dakota, just below the Canadian border," she replied, ignoring the comment. "Apparently, they felt it all the way to Arizona."

Harry's eyes widened in horror; his bottom lip trembled slightly. "Oh, my God! The devastation..."

Yipes, she thought. Okay, so maybe that was a more intense reaction than she'd expected to get from him. And if this was how he normally responded to bad news, it was no wonder he could literally make himself sick over a fictional disease. Still, she decided to press on.

"I know," she said, trying to sound as serious about the situation as he was taking it. "It could have been terrible if it had struck a city or town. Thankfully, it was a rural area."

He wasn't really listening. She could see it in his face. "Did you know," Harry said, "that a single meteor was responsible for killing off the dinosaurs over sixty-five million years ago?" The words seemed to pour out of him in an excited rush. "Ten miles across. That's how large scientists have estimated it was. It landed just off the Yucatan Peninsula and the dust and dirt the impact threw into

the atmosphere blocked out the sun's rays for years. It killed off half the species on the planet, including the dinosaurs."

Oh, Lord, she thought, where is this going? She shook her head. It didn't matter; she needed him to focus on what she was trying to tell him. "That's fascinating, Harry, but—"

"An Extinction Level Event, it's called," he continued, his voice rising in pitch. "Some environmental groups have posited that we're living in the middle of one right now, that the rate of species disappearing from the planet on a daily rate is proof that we're heading toward another ice age."

"I think we're getting off-track here, Harry," Leslie countered. "Obviously, the one that hit last night wasn't that big. I mean, we're all still here, aren't we?" She eyed him suspiciously. "You're not some kind of expert on meteor impacts, are you?"

That's all I'd need, she thought. The one and only idea I can come up with to combat this thing, and it gets shot to hell by a closet astronomer.

Harry shook his head. "No, but I've read a lot of books on the subject."

Leslie quietly breathed a sigh of relief. There's one hurdle cleared, she thought.

But Harry, apparently, was only getting warmed up. "You know, several scientists actually believe a meteor strike, in today's climate, could bring on an ice age in a matter of hours." He paused and started as he appeared to realize something important. "It would be a disaster," he whispered. "A total global disaster."

"It's not a disaster, Harry," she said. "It's a miracle."

At least that comment managed to interrupt his doom-and-gloom-filled monologue. Harry stared at her, confusion etched on his features. "I don't understand."

Leslie turned toward the door. "Gentlemen, if you would?"

On cue, Morgenstern and one of his technicians entered the room; between them they carried a large metal box marked with HAZARDOUS MATERIALS warnings. They placed it on the countertop near the door, then Morgenstern dismissed his assistant.

"The CCD believes residue found at the meteor strike site contains a rare element," Leslie explained to her patient. "One that could be virucidal."

Morgenstern unlocked the box and lifted the lid; a cloud of dry ice "fog" billowed out from the Styrofoam-lined interior. He reached inside and withdrew a small glass container partially filled with a dark purple fluid.

"You're talking about a cure," Harry said. Disbelief was evident in the tone of his voice.

"Yes, I am," Leslie replied happily. She went to a cabinet and selected a sterile syringe, then walked over to Morgenstern, who handed her the solution. She forced down the syringe's plunger to clear the tube of air, then sank the needle through the container's rubber stopper. Using her thumb to pull back the plunger, she began filling the syringe.

"It arrived from our Atlanta headquarters about ten minutes ago," Morgenstern added, delivering his lines as she'd instructed him. "They didn't have the time to test the effectiveness of the solution, though."

Harry eyed the fluid warily. "But what if it doesn't work? What if it makes me worse?"

Good God, Leslie thought. Has this man never been optimistic about anything in his life? "I won't lie to you, Harry. It's a possibility."

He frowned. "A cure to a fictional virus that just happens to turn up a few days after I contract the disease? Do you realize how crazy that sounds?"

"After what's happened in the last forty-eight hours, Harry, I'm willing to believe anything is possible." She raised an inquisitive eyebrow; gave him a challenging gaze. "How about you?"

He shook his head. "I don't know," he muttered. "I just don't know."

"You're the key to this, Harry. If you don't test this vaccine, everyone in this building might die." She smiled, placed a gentle hand on his arm. "I need you to trust me, Harry."

He looked at her, then at the syringe, fear stretching his pale features. Fiery-red eyes closed for a moment; then he slowly opened them and fixed his gaze on Leslie. He extended his arm. "All right. Do it fast, before I lose my nerve."

She didn't wait to give him an opportunity to reconsider.

"It should have worked by now," Leslie muttered in frustration sometime later. "What's taking him so long?"

For the fifth time in an hour, she checked her watch, then got up from her desk and paced the floor of her office. All that was good for was wearing a hole in the carpeting and giving her tiny electrical shocks whenever she reached for anything metallic. It did nothing to take her mind off Harry, or cause the time to pass faster. Finally, faced with nothing better to do, she strode to the door and flung it open.

She walked out into the hall to find Rhonda sitting in Exam One, care being provided by yet another of the CCD's army of spacesuited techs. The black lumps had multiplied since she'd last checked on her sharp-tongued ally in this losing battle against one man's overpowering imagination; they now covered the nurse's arms from wrists to shoulders, her legs from ankles to calves.

"How are you holding up?" Leslie asked as she entered the room.

Rhonda laughed acidly. "Just waiting for the dam to burst," she quipped, pointing toward her reddened eyes. She nodded toward the technician. "I already warned Dr Silvestri she might want to spread the newspapers in the waiting room around the floor here before it happens. I know how Dr Marks feels about spilled blood getting on anything."

Leslie forced herself to smile. "You really need to work on that bedside manner of yours, Nurse Harrington. It..." She shrugged. "Well, it sucks."

Rhonda nodded. "Now you know the reason I never became a doctor. Trying to be so damn cheerful to the patients, smiling all the time so they don't get worried, that's just not the real me."

I'll say, Leslie thought wryly.

The nurse tilted her head in the direction of Exam Three. "So, what's going on with Typhoid Harry?"

"No change, I'm afraid." Leslie sighed. "I was so sure the meteor story would do the trick—"

"Dr Coburn!" Harry suddenly screamed.

She froze in mid-sentence, mouth hanging open to utter the next syllable. Instead, she shot a glance at the hall, then back to Rhonda. "You don't think?"

The nurse held up her misshapen arms. "I'm not seeing anything different, are you?" She frowned. "Don't get your hopes up too high, doctor."

Leslie nodded somberly. "I won't, but that's all we've got left."

She turned and raced down the hall to Exam Three, to find Harry sitting up on the table. The look of total confusion that contorted his features made her stop short. Could something worse than before be happening?

He turned to face her, eyes bright with fear. "Leslie?"

She swallowed, her throat suddenly tight. "Yes, Harry?"

"I... I think something is happening..."

Ignoring the monitor feeds attached to his arms, he moved his hands to his shirt and began unbuttoning it. Leslie stepped into the room and cautiously walked toward her patient, gaze fixed on his chest as the shirt was pulled open.

The lumps were gone, vanished completely. Sent back to planet Zebulon, no doubt.

"Oh, thank God," she whispered. Hesitantly, she rolled up the sleeves of her lab coat to check her arms.

They, too, were clear of the infection.

She laughed nervously. "It worked... it worked..." she muttered hoarsely. She felt like bursting into tears of joy, but managed to hold her emotions in check. It wasn't confidence-building for a physician to lose it in front of a patient, no matter how joyous the occasion. Better to wait until she could close the door to her office, and then allow the floodgates to open.

"What does it mean, Dr Coburn?" Harry asked.

"It means we're cured, Harry," she said, and smiled. "The virucide worked perfectly." Unable to keep the smile from turning into an ear-to-ear grin, she turned toward the door. "I have to check on the others."

"Wait," Harry replied. "What if I relapse? Or what if *new* symptoms arise?"

Please, God, no, she thought, and forced down the twinge of panic she felt threatening to take control. "Are there any other symptoms in the book?" she asked.

He started to reply, halted, then lowered his gaze. "No," he said quietly. It almost sounded like he was disappointed.

"Then you're going to be fine, Harry," she assured him. "We're *all* going to be fine."

He nodded, yet from the tight bow of his lips, the sharp snap of his head looked more like a gesture intended to make her happy, rather than any indication that he truly agreed with her. "But what about the meteor strike?" he asked.

Oh, Lord, back to that again, she thought. Can't he just accept things for the way they are?

"Forget about it, Harry," she replied. "Just forget about the whole thing."

"I wish I could," he muttered. He looked up at her, a worried expression darkening his features. "Are you familiar with Robert Frost, Leslie?"

"You mean 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'?" she asked. "*That* Robert Frost?"

Harry nodded.

"Why do you ask?" There was something about the set of his brow, the pout of his lips, that told Leslie something was going on, but she couldn't figure out what it might be, couldn't see where the conversation was going. It was certainly an odd topic to discuss at this point, she thought, considering all they'd just gone through.

"In 'Fire and Ice'," Harry replied, "Frost wrote:

"Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice."

A queasy sensation roiled across Leslie's stomach. He was still focused on the meteor story and his worries about a new ice age coming. It was more than annoying, it was starting to disturb her. If a science-fiction novel could inspire him to create a full-blown disease that had already started to spread throughout Emerson over the course of a few days, one that hopefully was now in complete remission, what might all this talk about impact craters and the extinction of the dinosaurs do for his imagination?

For a moment, she considered telling him the truth, explaining to him in clear, direct terms how she'd told a little white lie in order to cure him and everyone else of the peculiar ailment he'd brought into their lives. But then she realized it wouldn't do her any good: Finding out the vaccine was a fake would only cause Harry to go back to worrying about the deadly, incurable "space plague," and before long everyone in the building would be infected again, probably with even worse symptoms than before.

And then he'd never trust any other cures I might be able to formulate, Leslie thought. There'd be no stopping the disease this time.

She settled for gently squeezing his hand in assurance and giving him her best smile. "You shouldn't get so worked up about this, Harry. You've just been through a very trying and tiring experience. Give yourself some time to rest before you start worrying about other things." She wagged an authoritative finger at him. "Doctor's orders."

Harry smiled weakly. "All right, doctor. I'll do my best."

"That's all I can ask of my patients," Leslie said. But as she turned to leave the room, she couldn't help but notice the dark clouds of intense concentration that were already beginning to shade his eyes.

TWELVE

An unexpected chill suddenly ran through Leslie as she stepped into the hall. She shivered for a moment, then vigorously rubbed her hands up and down her arms to make the blood circulate a little faster. She'd have to ask maintenance to turn down the air conditioning when they got the chance.

Morgenstern strolled over to join her. He'd removed his protective hood and now carried it under his left arm. "Congratulations, doctor. Whatever you did, it sure worked. I just heard from our other teams: all traces of the infection have disappeared from Mrs Mendolsohn's contacts." He bared his teeth in an approximation of a smile. "Looks like I owe you an apology."

"Thanks," Leslie replied. She led him over to the nursing station where Rhonda sat, happily enjoying the absence of welts on her arms. "I want to call Dr Marks, tell him about the placebo." She leaned close to them, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "And then maybe he can refer Harry to someone a little more practiced in dealing with..." she held up her index and middle fingers to form quotation marks, "the powers of the mind."

"Who?" Morgenstern asked jovially. "The Amazing Kreskin?"

Leslie shook her head. "I was thinking more along the lines of a mental health care expert."

Morgenstern chuckled. "I don't think you'll find one on the entire planet who's had experience with an individual who can create real-life 'space diseases' just from reading a book. Sounds like one of those Japanese shows my kids are always watching on the Cartoon Network." He paused for a moment, as though to consider a notion that had just come to him, then snapped his fingers. "Hey! Maybe the military might be interested in your patient. That's some power he's got there."

Rhonda smiled. "A hypochondriac used by the government as the ultimate biological weapon against terrorism? Wasn't something like that on the Sci-Fi Channel just last week? I think my boyfriend watched it."

Leslie couldn't help but grin; it did sound incredibly silly. "Stop it, you two," she admonished them lightheartedly. "Just because Harry possesses some kind of reverse psychophysical ability we don't understand—"

Rhonda snorted derisively. "Like he understands it any better."

"That's no reason to treat him like a fictional character in a low-budget made-for-TV movie." Leslie pointed a warning finger at her nurse. "I'd be very careful about how I interact with Harry from this point on. Somehow, he's found a way to tap into a power we can't even begin to understand. Do you really need any more proof of how dangerous that makes him?"

"Oooohhh." Rhonda shuddered comically. "What is he gonna do if I make him mad? Wish me into a cornfield?"

The smile faded, replaced by a stern expression. "You wouldn't want to find that out firsthand, would you?" Leslie asked sharply.

Rhonda started to say something in jest, obviously thought better of it, then closed her mouth.

"That's what I thought," Leslie said.

"So, where do we go from here, doctor?" Morgenstern asked.

Leslie reached for the phone and pulled it onto the counter in front of her. "Well, the first thing we do is let everybody know the danger has passed and the situation is under control, or as under control as it can be, given the circumstances. Then we see how Dr Marks wants to handle this. I imagine we'll be facing something of a public relations nightmare of our own once word gets out about the quarantine." She grimaced. "If everybody doesn't already know about it. Emerson isn't *that* big a city, after all."

"How are you going to explain the miraculous cure?" Morgenstern asked.

Leslie grunted and picked up the receiver. "Forget the cure. I'm not sure how I'm going to explain the source of the disease."

Morgenstern smiled. "Just tell them that even hypochondriacs get sick sometimes. And when they come down with something as complicated as a 'space bug'... Well, they take a little longer to treat."

Leslie's right eyebrow rose in a quizzical fashion. "And should I tell them that's the official word on the subject from the Center for

Contagious Diseases?"

Morgenstern held up his hands in a gesture meant to ward her off. "Don't try putting the spotlight on me, Doctor Coburn," he said with a grin. "Your patient, your treatment. You go take center stage when people start asking their questions; I'll just stand on the side and tell them how pleased the agency is with the ingenuity you displayed in devising a solution to the problem."

"And what a solution!" Rhonda laughed and shook her head. "Saline with purple food coloring. Now I've seen everything."

"And that, Nurse Harrington, is why I keep paying off those student loans," Leslie replied. "So I can keep up-to-date with all the latest tricks of the trade." She punched the number for Marks's cell phone; the call went through, but it just kept ringing. "That's strange. There's no answer."

"Well, they were all standing around in the parking lot, last time I checked," Morgenstern commented. "I already sent everybody in your waiting room on their way, including your receptionist. No reason to hold them now. Why don't you just go outside and tell Marks in person?"

"Sounds like a plan," Leslie agreed. She turned to Rhonda. "Want to take a walk?"

Rhonda practically jumped to her feet. "Sure. Anything to get out of this air-conditioning. I'm freezing to death." She rubbed her arms and shivered. "Did somebody crank it up, or was I just too busy to notice how cold it was getting?"

"I don't know," Leslie replied. "I was going to talk to maintenance about it after they're allowed back in the building. I just finished treating one illness. We don't need to all come down with colds now because somebody felt too warm and decided to lower the temperature."

They started down the hall toward the front of the building, taking quick strides to get the blood really flowing so they could warm up, arms folded across their chests to conserve body heat. But the closer they got to the waiting area, the colder the air became, until they could see their breath in front of their faces.

"What the hell is going on?" Rhonda asked. Teeth chattering, there was panic in her eyes as she looked to Leslie for an answer.

Leslie said nothing; she already had a good idea of what was happening. As farfetched as it sounded, there could be only one explanation. She broke into a run, forcing herself to see what lay beyond the end of the hall.

Rhonda fell into step behind her. "Dr Coburn, would you please tell me what's wrong? It's not the air conditioning that's making this place so damn cold, is it?"

Choosing to ignore the questions, Leslie bolted into the reception area and came to a halt.

The windows were covered with frost.

The queasy sensation in her stomach returned, stronger now, but she fought down the bile that threatened to rise in her throat. A small part of her mind warned her about jumping to conclusions before she had all the facts in front of her—she was a doctor, after all, it reminded her—but she didn't need to order any tests this time, didn't need to examine charts or graphs or patient history files to know what she'd find on the other side of the glass.

Rhonda stopped alongside her. "Holy... How did the windows get like that?" She leaned forward, as though to examine them closer. "Is that ice?"

Leslie strode quickly over to the front doors before she could second-guess herself, give herself a reason to turn around and go back to the examination rooms without having to face the truth. She reached for the brass handles, only to snatch her fingers back before they closed around the ice-crusted metal. A mental image of a boy with his tongue stuck to a frozen lamppost in the middle of winter jumped through her thoughts; she couldn't recall where the memory came from, but she was glad enough that it had, otherwise her fingers would have suffered the same fate when she made contact with the door. She shrugged off her lab coat, wrapped it around one of the handles, and pulled.

The door wouldn't budge.

She turned to Rhonda. "It's stuck," she explained. "I think it's frozen."

"Let me give you a hand." Rhonda joined her, and they both grasped the handle. "Okay, on three. One... two... three!"

They yanked back with all their combined strength, and were rewarded with the sound of ice cracking. The door opened about a foot, and the two women staggered back under the blast of numbingly cold air that howled through the portal.

Leslie moved toward the door, but Rhonda stepped in front of her. "What's going on, Dr Coburn?" she demanded. "What did that fruitcake Raditch do this time?" She waved a warning index finger in Leslie's face. "And don't try telling me he didn't know what he was doing either, the little freak!"

Leslie shoved her aside and walked forward a step. "I'm not telling you anything of the kind. It's just... It's just..." She halted on the threshold and turned back to her friend. "I have to know for sure."

And then, tilting her head down against the force of the wind, she stepped from the building and into a scene from Harry Raditch's worst nightmare.

Everything was covered in thick layers of ice: cars, trucks, buildings, street signs, lightpoles, mailboxes, birds and people. Hundreds of people as far down the street as she could see, apparently caught unawares by a sudden change in temperature that must have plummeted to sub-zero levels before any of them truly realized what was happening. Frozen in grotesque positions of agony and terror for the rest of eternity, much like the citizens of Pompeii had been when Mount Vesuvius erupted and snuffed out their lives in a river of ash and lava.

She found Dr Marks not too far away, sitting in his car, still clutching his cell phone. The expression he wore was a combination of fright and anger. He probably realized what was being done to him as it occurred, yet there was nothing he could do to save himself. A fate shared by the other dozen or so medical specialists and police officers whose frozen corpses were scattered around the parking lot.

And as she looked at the devastation surrounding her, Leslie knew it wasn't limited to Emerson, Illinois, or even the immediate area. It couldn't be. Ice ages didn't work that way.

Harry Raditch's mind didn't work that way.

She stared at the storm-tossed sky. It was a swirling mass of white and gray, black and brown, a chaotic mixture of snow and dirt pushed high enough into the atmosphere to dim what few rays of sunlight were able to touch the earth. Clouds shifted and roiled in the stiff wind, like a flag caught in a breeze, or a burial shroud draped loosely around the contours of a dead world.

The sound of footsteps crunching on the hardpacked snow behind her signaled Rhonda's arrival. "Jesus God Almighty!" the nurse gasped. "How could that little bookworm have caused all of this?"

"The meteor strike," Leslie whispered hoarsely. "Harry made it come true." She turned to Rhonda. "What have I done?"

"What are you talking about?" Rhonda asked.

"The story about the meteors," Leslie explained. "Harry told me about how one of them is supposed to be responsible for killing off the dinosaurs and causing an ice age; he was worried that the one I said landed in North Dakota might do the same thing to us."

"What, and he started another ice age just by thinking about it?" Rhonda snorted. "That's impossible. He couldn't have that kind of power."

"Doesn't he, Rhonda?" Leslie snapped at her. She gestured at the frozen landscape. "Then how do you explain this? Do you have *any* idea how long it would take for an ice age to take effect?"

"Do you?" Rhonda asked quietly.

"No," Leslie admitted. "Years, I'd guess; probably more like centuries. But I do know it would take a hell of a lot longer than a few minutes!"

Rhonda's brow furrowed. "And you're saying he got this crazy idea in his head all because you made up that story about a meteor crashing in the middle of nowhere?"

Leslie nodded, the anger draining from her system. "I should have taken more time to think it through clearly, to make sure the story didn't have any weak spots where he could poke holes in it. But I got

so caught up in finding a way to trick Harry into reversing the damage he'd caused I didn't even consider that he might be familiar with some aspects of astronomy. I just figured that, with his choice of reading material being science fiction—"

"He'd be one more geek who never bothered to look into the 'science' part of the fiction?" the nurse concluded. "That he'd just go along with what you said because he didn't know better?"

Leslie hesitated before responding; it was a hard thing to admit. "Yes."

Rhonda sneered. "Well, wasn't that..." Her voice trailed off and she lowered her gaze to stare at the ground. Her reaction didn't surprise Leslie. What could she say, after all? Come right out and accuse one of her bosses of royally screwing up, of somehow destroying the whole damn world over one lousy patient? Crow loudly and say I told you so for trying to help a man with psychiatric problems on a level no one could ever have suspected, only to have the whole thing blow up in her face? That would certainly get her fired.

Except there would be no terminations, or even regular paychecks, for Rhonda to worry about. The only concern for her, for Leslie, for all the people huddled in the MMA offices, including Harry, damn him, would be finding ways to survive this hostile environment. They needed food and warm clothing for a start, then they...

And that's when the true severity of the situation—the crushing realization that she had lost everything she ever cared about, lost everyone she ever loved—hit her. Her mother and father, her friends and neighbors, her former lovers and ex-boyfriends, all dead and gone, wiped from existence in the space of a few heartbeats by just a thought.

"Terry..." she whispered.

She wandered away from the now-silent nurse, uncertain as to whether she should say anything more; words might only worsen the tension between them. Not knowing what else to do, she let her feet take her on a circuitous path across the parking lot, not really caring where they carried her, so long as it gave her something better to do than just stand around with her mouth hanging open.

You'll catch flies if you keep doing that, her mother used to warn her. But there were no flies to be seen, nor any other sign of insect life, although there were probably cockroaches scurrying around out there among the ice-covered buildings. She remembered hearing someplace that roaches could survive the nuclear fallout of World War III, if it ever came to pass; no reason not to believe, then, that they couldn't find a way to tough out a never-ending winter.

"How?" she asked herself, teeth now starting to chatter as the numbing cold seeped into her bones. "How could I have been so wrong about what I did?"

She thought she'd come up with the right solution, the right treatment for the problem by convincing Harry she had reversed his irreversible condition. An imaginary cure developed for an imaginary sickness, she reasoned, and the placebo effect would take care of the rest.

And she'd been right in that regard. But she'd forgotten there was an equal chance that an alternate, negative result might be encountered when she administered the shot, depending on Harry's emotional state of mind, a *nocebo* effect that might create new adverse symptoms she wasn't prepared to handle. Like being faced with a man's sudden, irrational fear of meteor strikes and ice ages, Extinction Level Events and the end of civilization as we know it. Or discovering that he actually possessed the power to make his fears a reality on a scale she couldn't even begin to comprehend.

In the blink of an eye, the world had come to an abrupt, brutal end, because of an over-imaginative hypochondriac who put too much of himself into the stories he read, and a desperate physician spinning him a yarn about meteors and cures from outer space. Leslie felt like laughing at the absurdity of the situation, but she knew that once she started, it would soon enough turn to a fit of hysteria. Instead, a single tear rolled down her left cheek, only to freeze solid in the bitterly cold wind.

Her mouth twisted in a soured expression. "Can't even cry about what I've caused," she remarked with a sneer.

A hand gently touched her shoulder. She turned to find Rhonda standing behind her. The nurse was carrying a man's gray raincoat;

Leslie recognized it as belonging to Dr Gruber. Rhonda had probably run back inside to retrieve it while Leslie was mentally castigating herself. She looked at the coat. Not quite the best attire to wear under these frigid conditions, but with its woolen zippered lining it was certainly better than nothing.

"Here you go, doctor," Rhonda said, draping it over Leslie's shoulders. "We'd better get inside. I figure it's really gonna get cold when the sun goes down." She paused. "Not that there's really any sun to see, but my watch says it's only two o'clock, so..."

Leslie gazed at the darkening sky for a moment, then turned back to the nurse. "What... what am I going to do, Rhonda?" she said hoarsely. "What am I going to do?"

Rhonda took her by the shoulders and steered her back toward the medical offices. "You'll think of something, Leslie. There's a way to turn this thing around. You convinced the nutjob once, you can do it again."

Leslie stopped in her tracks, eyes wide with fear. "But... but what if Harry doesn't want to be convinced?"

Rhonda hesitated, as though unsure of how to respond. When she finally opened her mouth to reply, though, the only thing Leslie heard was the shuddering roar of the biting, arctic wind. It sounded very much like the last exhalation of a terminally ill patient just before they passed away.

Or the final gasp of a world gone dead.

Harry Raditch had always possessed an active imagination, an overactive one, you might even say. He couldn't always control it and he certainly never fully understood how it worked its strange magic, but once he'd gotten an idea in his head, it was hard for him to let it go. He worked it around in his thoughts, then worked it around some more, gnawed on its edges and smoothed out its rough spots, giving a wisp of a notion substance and form until it practically sprung fully grown from his mind, as the Greek god Zeus had given birth to his daughter, Athena.

A misfit, folks used to call him when he was young. Always with his head in the clouds, always looking to the stars, always dreaming the big dreams.

And now Harry Raditch had dreamed the biggest of them all.

A dream from which there would be no awakening.

Doctor Leslie Coburn had a brilliant idea: using an imaginary cure for an imaginary illness. But like the virus itself, Harry Raditch took her cure to heart... and made it all too real.

A testament to the amazing powers of the mind... in the Twilight Zone.